

Foolhardy Feats.

I.—THE NIAGARA FOOLS.

BY GEORGE DOLLAR.

[Photos. from Underwood & Underwood, Stereoscopic View Sellers.]



HE ball started rolling in 1829, when Sam Patch erected a ladder on the footpath under Goat Island, and announced that he would jump into the Niagara River. The hotel-keepers patted him on the back, and left no stone unturned to draw the biggest crowd of the season. Patch rested the bottom of the ladder on the edge of the river, with the top inclining over it and staying it with ropes to the trees on the bank. At the top was a small platform, and from this Patch dived 97ft. He jumped again, and proved that the first feat was not a fluke. Then, having established a "record," he left Niagara, went to another place, jumped again—and got killed.

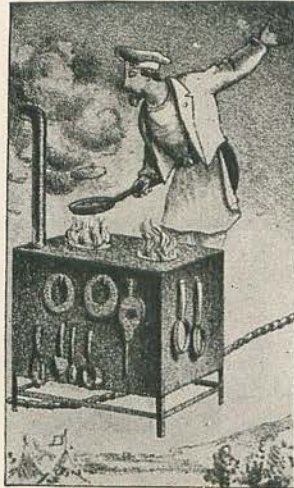
It is easy to brand such men fools. Any man, I take it, who puts his life in jeopardy, unless for heroic reasons, is a fool. Blondin was one, although he died in his bed at Ealing, and left behind him a reputation as the greatest tight-rope walker of his time. It was in 1859 that he first proposed to stretch a wire across Niagara River, and there was a unanimous howl of derision at the idea. At that time, people had no hesitation in ranking Blondin amongst the idiots, but they could not resist the temptation to see him throw his life away, and the crowd that gathered was the largest ever seen at the Falls.

What Blondin did is now stale history. He got out on the rope with a 40lb. pole, crossed the river, and then came back again. He lowered a cord to the old *Maid of the Mist*, and drew up a bottle, from which he took a drink. Then, after some feats of balancing, he came ashore amid the huzzas of the crowd, and the whole country rang with the news of the exploit. A couple of months later he carried his manager, Harry Calcourt, across on his back. It is said, and it has also been

denied, that on this occasion Blondin had a quarrel with Calcourt. The latter had previously been trained to balance himself in order that he might be let down on the rope in the middle of the river, while Blondin took a breath. The wind was strong, the manager's coat-tails began to flutter, and the rope swayed in a sickly manner. Then, according to the story,

Blondin threatened to leave his manager on the rope, at the mercy of the waters underneath, unless he kept himself under control. Needless to say, the threat was successful, and the trip across was safely made.

A few days later the fearless Blondin again crossed the river, chained hand and foot. On his return, he carried a cooking stove, and made an omelet, which he lowered to the deck of the *Maid of the Mist* for consumption. At another time he crossed with a bushel-basket on each foot, and at another carried a lady on his back. In 1860 he performed before the Prince of Wales, the rope being



BLONDIN COOKING AN OMELET OVER NIAGARA.

stretched 230ft. above the rapids, between two of the steepest cliffs on the river. He turned somersaults before His Royal Highness and went through his whole repertory. He even managed to cross on a pair of stilts. But more wonderful than this special feat is the fact that for nearly seventy years he walked the tight-rope without accident. He had several narrow "squeaks," to be sure, but his record was clean.

After Blondin, the Deluge. The last thirty years has witnessed an unending procession of fools to Niagara, some of them to rival Blondin's feats, others to jump, and still others, with various *bizarre* ideas, to risk their lives in the attempt for mushroom glory. A man named Bellini jumped three times into the river in 1873, and in 1886 he climbed to the iron railing on the Upper Suspension Bridge, knocked the ice from



MCDONELL CROSSING NIAGARA GORGE IN BASKETS.

under his feet to secure a footing, and at the signal of a pistol shot jumped into the air. He struck the water in four seconds, broke a rib, lost his senses, and came to the surface some 60ft. from where he entered. This was the same man who jumped from Hungerford Bridge in 1888 and was drowned.



JENKINS CROSSING ON A BICYCLE.



MCDONELL HANGING FROM THE TIGHT-ROPE.

There has hardly been a year in which some tight-rope exhibition has not taken place at Niagara Falls. Some years ago a young fellow named Stephen Peere stretched a cable across and made several passages. In 1878 he gave variety to his career by jumping from one of the bridges, and in 1887 he finished it by leaping to his death. He left behind a reputation and a wire cable. The latter has been used by other gymnasts to save the expense of putting up a new rope. A man named De Leon went out to the

middle of it shortly after, and getting frightened, came back to the bosom of his family. McDonnell made several very creditable attempts, and proved himself an excellent walker. He went across with baskets on his feet, and frightened the gaping crowd by hanging with his legs from the wire, head downwards. Another freak named Jenkins, with an eye for effect, made the trip on a bicycle. The machine, however, was turned upside down, and had an ingeniously contrived balancing apparatus, in lieu of a pole, attached to a metal framework to the wheels. So the feat was not remarkable, after all.

On the same wire, Samuel J. Dixon,

DIXON CROSSING THE RAPIDS ON A $\frac{3}{4}$ IN. CABLE.

a Toronto photographer, on September 6th, 1890, crossed the gorge, and gave an excellent equilibrist exhibition. One of his crack feats is shown in our illustration, which represents him as lying with his back on the wire. This was a $\frac{3}{4}$ in. cable, and measured 923ft. in length. Dixon has made several other passages, always with great *éclat*.

It is marvellous how few accidents there are on the tight-rope at Niagara. The performers, with one accord and delightful *sang froid*, turn you away with a wave of the hand when you suggest fear.

"Tut, tut! my boy, it's nothing," they say, and look down upon you with contempt. Then, in a fraternal moment, they add, "You can't help getting across. You get out to the middle of the rope, and there you are! If you turn back you lose your

money, and if you go on, you get it." That's all.

One of the most remarkable feats was the trip of the *Maid of the Mist* through the rapids in 1861. This boat was built to make excursions at the foot of the Falls, but the business did not pay, and it was decided to sell her at Lewiston, some miles down the river. Now, be it known that the Niagara River, below the Falls, runs for some distance between two cliffs of solid rock. This part is called the Whirlpool Rapids, and at the end of the rapids, where the swift and surging current impinges suddenly against the left bank, is the noted whirlpool. It was through this that the *Maid* had to go. She was commanded by Joel Robinson, and she got through; but Robinson never tried the trip again. It is reported that he aged twenty years in appearance in passing through the mighty eddy, and he died a few years later, the first man to get through the whirlpool with a boat and his life.

The biggest of all the Niagara idiots are those who throw dummy men into the water above the Falls, just for the fun of the thing. Of course, the sight of a human figure going to his death is enough to stir a lump of steel to activity—and the number of soft-hearted people who have stood near the rapids throw-

ing out ropes and hopes to a lump of stuffing can be counted by the dozens. It is bad enough to gaze at a live man risking his life for a handful of silver, but it is worse to make a jest of death.

The latest tight-rope exhibitions have been those of Charles S. Calverley, who is styled "The World's Champion." Calverley must have forgotten Blondin, for many of his feats are



DIXON LYING ON HIS BACK.

those which made the Frenchman famous nearly forty years ago. The wheelbarrow business, shown in our illustration, is certainly middle-aged, although it still remains as difficult to perform as it was in Blondin's day. But people never tire of it, and our illustration supports the statement that these same people will even do gymnastics themselves on the framework of a bridge in order to see other fools risk their lives.

A glance now at Signorina Maria Spelterini, and we have done with the tight-rope. Here she is with baskets on her feet—a dainty figure gradually forging her way to the middle of the rope. The performance brought out a tremendous crowd some years ago, probably because she was the first woman daring enough to try conclusions with Blondin and his many imitators. She got across safely with her baskets and her name, and for ever established the fact that a woman is as level-headed as a man.

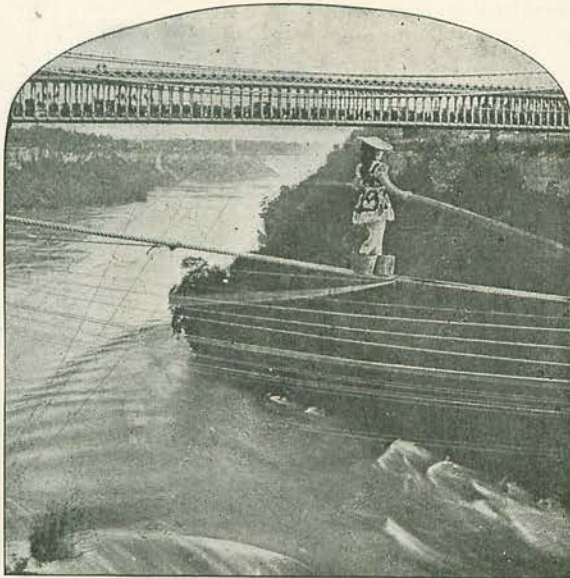
On September 7th, 1889, Steve Brodie, who had achieved great notoriety by jumping from Brooklyn Bridge, created a greater sensation by going over the Falls. He wore an india-rubber suit,

surrounded by thick steel bands. The suit was very thickly padded, yet Brodie was brought ashore bruised and insensible. His victories won, he now rests in New York City, the proprietor of a Bowery bar-room, and the pride of the neighbourhood.

The whirlpool boom was at its height when Captain Webb was killed, but the power of the waters in that deadly hole was first tested as far back as 1811. In that year, a dare-devil British soldier, who was logging near the whirlpool, got afloat on a log and was carried about in the pool for hours. He was finally saved, a wiser and a better man. Then came a long period of quiet, until the *Maid of the Mist* performed her record trip. In 1877 a man named Charles A. Percy got through in a life-boat. Not an ordinary life-boat, to be sure, for it had been especially constructed, and contained two air chambers, in one of which Percy hid himself. Elated by his success, Percy now made a wager with Robert W. Flack, of Syracuse, "for a race through the Whirlpool Rapids in their respective lifeboats for five hundred dollars a side." Flack's boat had no air cushions, and was

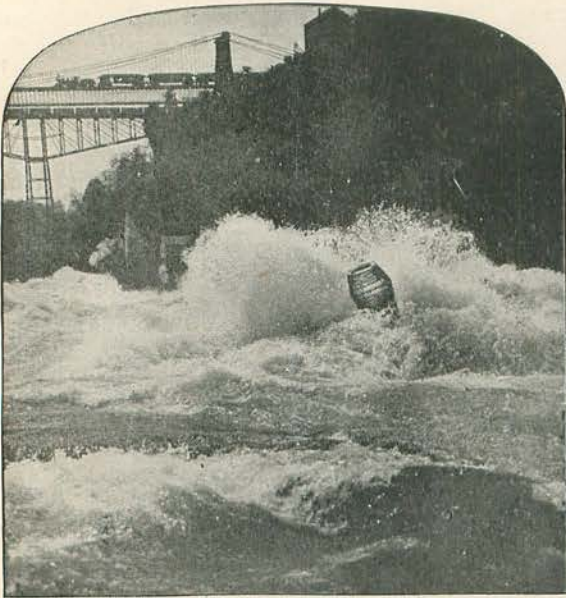


CALVERLEY AND HIS WHEELBARROW.



SPELTERINI OVER THE RAPIDS.

the Whirlpool Rapids in their respective lifeboats for five hundred dollars a side." Flack's boat had no air cushions, and was



GRAHAM AND HIS BARREL.

partly constructed of cork. The race was set for August 1st, 1888, but on July 4th, Flack made a trial trip in the presence of an immense concourse of spectators. At first he went along gaily, but in three minutes his boat was upset and carried into the whirlpool bottom upwards. An hour later it was secured, and Flack's body, a mass of bruised flesh, was found strapped to the seat of the boat.

No lifeboat has since been tried, but several other attempts have been made to get through the whirlpool. Some of these have been successful. A burly Boston policeman, named Kendall, went through in a life-preserver, and several men have done it in barrels. At one time there was a perfect fever in the United States for shooting the rapids and whirlpool in a barrel, though what special honour is due to a man who shuts himself up in a specially-made barrel and goes through seething water, no one seems to know. At all events, Graham did it, and he got a "reputation" from it. His first trip was on July 11th, 1886. On August 19th of the same year he went again with two coopers of Buffalo, named Potts and Hazlitt. Then Mr. Potts and Miss Sadie Allen got into a barrel

and performed the trip. The barrels are enormous affairs made of oak, and the voyage lasts about twenty minutes.

The bravest man of all, and yet a fool, was Captain Matthew Webb. He wore no life-preserver, and scorned a barrel, depending on his own strength and no accoutrements to put him through. The disastrous attempt took place on July 24th, 1883. He quickly disappeared from the view of the crowd, came up again, and then went down, sucked and tossed by the raging water. How far he went alive is not known, and several places are now pointed out by the guides where he was last seen. The body was recovered in four days.

The fools are gathered in below the whirlpool. It is an even chance that your body will not be found, but the ferrymen who ply between Queenston and Lewiston may be relied upon to pick you up if you are around. They are always on the look-out for "finds," particularly when it is known that some "crank" has jumped from one of the bridges or swum the whirlpool—and disappeared. Sometimes it is months before the body is found.



THE LAST MOMENT OF CAPTAIN WEBB.