November 27, 1896 – Publication of *Cassell's Family Magazine*, one of the leading British monthly magazines, founded in 1853 and with a circulation of 70,000 copies. This issue features a major illustrated article by journalist W. B. Robertson, paying tribute to the artist who had delighted audiences for 35 years. Blondin, who had great trust in him, met him in Little Ealing just a few days after returning from Leeds, where he had given his final performance. During this visit, Robertson was deeply moved to discover that his friend was suffering from a painful and rapidly progressing terminal illness. — *Volume IV, Page 121, JLB Biography*

CASSELL'S

FAMILY MAGAZINE.

Illustrated.

DECEMBER, 1896, TO MAY, 1897.

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LIMITED:
LONDON, PARIS & MELBOURNE.

1897.

THE KING OF THE TIGHT-ROPE

NIAGARA HOUSE.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BLONDIN

ON TERRA FIRMA.

TO see an old, white-headed man walking quietly along, suddenly dip forward, as if he were going to embrace the earth, and then alight upon his head, is, one would suppose, to see an accident. When, however, the old man is seen to remain in the inverted position, then, deliberately regaining his feet, proceed to turn a somersault and walk on his quiet way again, the beholder is apt to rub his eyes and wonder whether or not they are deceiving him.

But anyone driving along the road from Brentford to Hanwell, in a trap sufficiently high to command a view of the grounds of Niagara House, might chance to see this, when Blondin, walking up the carriage drive or across the lawn to his workshop took it into his head to break the monotony of so prosaic a mode of progression as walking upon the surface of the earth.

If no odd gymnastic displays of the kind indicated were there to divert the attention of the passing stranger, he would be struck by the trimness and well-kept appearance of the grounds, and would conclude that no sluggard lived there. And he would conclude rightly, for Blondin is, or rather was—for he is far from well now—always doing something. When he is not performing, he will be found in his well-fitted workshop—at the forge or the drill or the bench or the lathe. He never requires plumber, smith, or carpenter. He acts for himself in these and nearly every other aspect of the householder's horror—the working man.

I remember, a few years ago, catching him one forenoon in his workshop. He was dressed in a gloriously dilapidated coat (in the button-hole of which I noticed the Spanish decoration of the Order of *Isabel la Catolica*, which confers the title of Chevalier), on his head was a still more dilapidated soft hat, and he was filing, in a quite professional style,

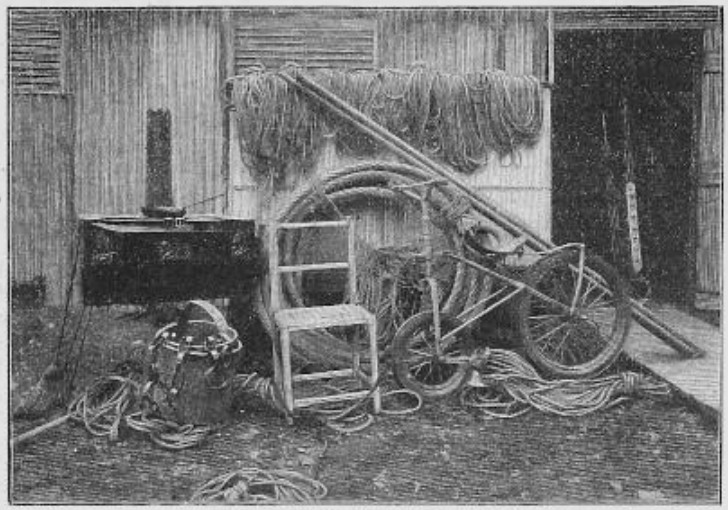
something held by a vice. It was a hinge, I saw, and he told me that it was for one of the strong trunks he uses for conveying his plant.

"I do everything myself," he said in his broken English, "except you may say grow the hemp the rope is made from, and the trees the masts are cut out of!" And he smiled at the little exaggeration, adding by way of correction: "I not make my bicycle. I could though, if I like."

"Yes," I said, looking out of the workshop door upon quite a couple of hundred fowl, "and I see you grow your own eggs, and could use them to make omelettes with on the rope, if you like."

"Yes, yes!" he cried, delighted. Then becoming serious: "It is because I do so much myself that I have no accident. I know everything safe. That give me confidence."

Another visit to Blondin was paid in the cold weather. We sat in his comfortable dining-room—a blazing fire in front of us. Now, Blondin is difficult to follow in conversation at the best of times, for though he has been an Englishman for over thirty years, he cannot read a word of English, and it is only by a kindly use of the listener's imagination that he can be said to speak it. Blondin as a conversationalist is bad enough, but, with patience, intelligible. Blondin, however, with a dog's home thrown in!



SOME OF BLONDIN'S "PROPERTIES."

It was this way: Blondin is a fancier and breeder of black-and-tan terriers, usually having in his possession about a dozen of these monsters. It so happened at the time of my visit that seven of the precious pets had colds. It was for them the fire blazed, and for them, too, the room had been turned into a canine hospital.

The cosy baskets ranged round the fire, the dishes of dog food, even the dogs themselves, I did not mind; but the wheezing and the coughing and the snarling, mixed with Blondin's account of his experiences of Russian royalties—the subject we were talking about—left me under the impression that the Czar never ceased to cough, and that the only time a Grand Duke enjoyed himself was when, standing on his head or turning somersaults on a high rope, he could reduce himself to the dimensions of a tiny toy terrier—the tinier he succeeded in making himself, and the more he could shiver and cower, the better he liked it.

One other glimpse of the "King of the Air," "Knight of the Fearless Foot," "The Hempen Monarch," "King of the High Rope," "Lord of the Hempen Realm," "Prince of Acrobats," "Hero of Niagara," "Emperor of all Manilla," etc., as Blondin has been variously described by the reporters of the world. It was a bitterly cold night, and I was waiting for him in the room allotted to him when he is performing at the Agricultural Hall. He was on the rope. In he came from the performance, simply dripping with perspiration. No word was spoken. An attendant first attacked him and pulled the clothes right off him, another had meanwhile begun to towel him; then they both towelled him; and as they did so, he, too, got a towel with which he kept rubbing his face, head, and neck. Then he began to speak:—

"Bicycle no good to-night; too much fog up there; no rope to see." After that, conversation became general. Blondin had a good drink from a seltzer siphon. Food prepared by his own cook at home followed, and a little later he lay down on a couch, was warmly covered, and fell asleep. In two hours he had to perform again, then drive home, a distance of a dozen miles, in the cold.

That very evening we were speaking of his advancing age, and someone remarked that he would soon have to think of giving up his daring flights. I shall never forget his answer :—

"So long I can perform, I perform. That my health!"

How came Blondin not only to break all records in the way of high-rope gymnastics, but to surpass anything that had been even conceived as possible? The fact is, like poets, Blondins have to be born. In the first place, he has nerves of steel; nerves that have enabled him to go on eating his dinner in a hotel struck by lightning, while all around him was in confusion. He does not know what it is to be startled even. Then he has a muscular system of extreme strength and sensibility—so sensitive is he to muscular impressions that he might be relied on to restore the pound weight if the standard were lost. It is this sensitive muscular system that enables him to keep his balance, while his nerves give him confidence, keep him cool, prevent him from ever losing his head, even in emergencies when others would think all was lost. We have already seen how his mechanical aptitude helps him. There may be, and there no doubt are, men with Blondin's nerves, muscles, and craftsmanship; still, even with training, they would not make Blondins unless they had also Blondin's brains. Blondin is a man of originality, all his feats are his own. Just as his apparatus is his own creation, so are his tricks. In fact, he has all the mental equipment of a great designer, and under propitious circumstances would have developed into a great engineer.

It was a travelling show that awakened his aspirations to walk across a rope. He was a small boy of about five, when a gay youth, in all the glory of fleshings and spangles, came to the French village of St. Omer and performed on the rope. The juveniles were, of course, all struck; and Blondin was very uneasy until, having previously secreted a stout cord in his pocket, he got the opportunity to use it. His plan was already formed, and one day, when his mother was out of the way, he hastily placed two chairs back to back and stretched his line between them. Of course the chairs tilted and he fell. Other efforts followed with like result. At last, with a fishing-rod for balancing-pole and an old ship's cable, he managed to cross between two gate-posts. Then his delight was unbounded. Meanwhile, he had been exhibiting a taste for acrobatic feats in other ways, and the result was that his parents sent him for a course of training to *L'École de Gymnase* at Lyons. Such was the beginning of Blondin, son of one of Napoleon's warriors.

He became a great circus performer, could throw neater somersaults than had ever been

BLONDIN.
(From a photograph by H. Blondin, Brentford.)

thrown, and broke the record in leaping. He might have gone on breaking all such records and yet have remained unknown. The daring conception of crossing the Falls of Niagara, however, made him the subject of newspaper paragraphs throughout the world. Then one might read that "a crazy Frenchman had gone to Niagara and was intending to walk across the river on a rope." "The crazy Frenchman" knew what he was about, and soon achieved a distinction that no acrobatic performer had achieved before.

At the present time Chevalier Blondin—Chevalier inasmuch as he is a knight of Spain—is totally blind in the right eye, sees most imperfectly with the left, has been ailing for six or seven years without knowing it, is sustained chiefly on beef-tea, as he can eat nothing save the daintiest morsel of fish now and then and a boiled egg, and is afflicted with periodic fits of giddiness, so that at times he cannot walk across his dressing-room. As he tells me about his giddiness and inability

to walk across the floor, he adds, with a twinkle in his blue eyes: "I shall have to have my house fitted up with tight ropes to move about on, or I shall have my brains dashed out some day!"

Blondin, by the way, was always fond of a joke. When he went to Melbourne, over twenty years ago, he had to pay about £200 duty on his luggage.

"*Sacre!*" he said afterwards to a newspaper man, "I should like to carry a protectionist across the rope once, just once. I make him a free trader."

His perception of humour is very keen, too. So keen, indeed, that after making some fifty or eighty thousand people crack their throats in applauding him, it will be some little odd remark or incident that impresses itself most vividly on his mind. One such remark was made by a stout elderly woman to a companion after surveying the rope.

"Sarah," she said, "what a 'evinly line for dryin' on."

With Blondin's ailments, and at Blondin's age—he is rising seventy-three—anybody else would take to bed, or at least to an easy chair by the fireside. Not so the Hero of Niagara—the name, of the many that have been bestowed on him, that he prefers to all others. A day or two before I last saw him he had just returned home from Leeds, where he had given two performances at a height of seventy feet, and before crowds of from thirty to forty thousand people.

"I don't carry anyone across now, and I don't ride the bicycle," he remarks apologetically. "I can't see at all in the sunshine. I performed every week last year besides getting married. I was on the rope again after a honeymoon of twenty-four hours! I am now going to rest for a month or two, as my blind eye is to be operated on for cataract."

"But it doesn't matter whether you see or not on the rope?"

"Yes, it does. When I perform blindfolded I have a sack thrown over my head and shoulders as well as a handkerchief tied over my eyes. The handkerchief alone makes me as blind as possible. The sack, though it appears to add to the blindfolding and in a sense does so, is really a guide to me. But for it I shouldn't know whether I was perpendicular or not. By hanging evenly all round me it tells me that I am perpendicular. What else is there to tell me? I cannot see the top of the rope, and I cannot feel it with my feet, for the top is no different from the sides, or the bottom, or any other part. There are no edges for me to feel as there would be if I were walking on a flat surface."

"But you would feel you were going over to one side or the other?"

"Quite true; but the difficulty about that is that if you feel you are going over, you *are* going over; only an accident stops you then—I mean if you are on the ground in the ordinary way. The accident that usually prevents you from falling when you have lost balance is the fact that you have so much more ground than you actually use in walking. No such accident could prevent me. Consequently, I must on no account lose my balance. If I lose that I must go over."

"And then?"

"Oh, nothing! I have gone over before—was pushed over, in fact. Nay, more, I have been dead and buried!"

How Blondin fell off his rope at the Crystal Palace and froze the blood of the 80,000 spectators who had come to witness his extraordinary performance, has, perhaps, never been rightly told. Little was made of it at the time, as an active section of the public was clamouring for the authorities to put a stop to Blondin's daring flights. Blondin, however, was getting £100 an ascent, and, of course, he didn't want to be interfered with. The coffers of the Crystal Palace Company were overflowing, and, of course, its directors didn't want so attractive an item in their programme to be interfered with.

It was during a night performance—the finishing scene of all—when Blondin crosses in a blaze of fireworks with his wheelbarrow. He had reached the platform, and was still standing on the rope waiting for the attendant to lift his barrow over a small framework set with fireworks. Instead of lifting the barrow straight up to the height of the framework, and then taking it slowly forward as Blondin advanced, the attendant sought to take it round the framework. That, of course, threw Blondin quite off his balance, a position that was accentuated by the dropping of his long pole which had similarly been taken with him and his barrow to the side, invited, so to speak, to walk round a corner on the top of 100 feet of air!

It was a dreadful scene, and disturbed the minds of many that saw it for a long time. Just as Blondin fell back the last of the fireworks expired. The glowing ends of his pole were seen to descend like spent rockets. Then a crash was heard, followed by that sickening thud so well known. "He's done it this time!" "Great Heavens!" and such like expressions were used by the cooler spectators; the more excitable or sensitive incontinently and confusedly fled to their houses, and slept under the belief that they had seen the crowning act in Blondin's career.

In a sense they had, for nothing could excel the skill with which Blondin saved himself. He never lost his presence of mind. He let go his pole—a weight of forty pounds. One end struck the ground, and the "dull sickening thud" we all know without ever having heard was caused by the other portion and met with a much more serious accident. As he himself, naturally, did not remember anything of it, he gave me one of his scrap-books to take down the details. These were given, under the heading *Death of Blondin*, in a cutting from a New York paper, dated October 12, 1859. Blondin, it seems, having filled his

"'AH!!!'"

the quickened imagination of those that heard it. Meanwhile Blondin himself, falling back, threw his right leg across the rope in time to hook it with his knee-joint. Thus he hung, swaying to and fro; at last he swung himself high enough to grasp the rope with his hands. He then got astride of it, and without any difficulty reached the platform. A deeply interested spectator was Mrs. Blondin; she was carried away in a faint. The only unmoved party there was Blondin.

A couple of years before this, Blondin had pockets with American dollars, was going to cross Niagara just once more and then retire to Europe. Suddenly, however, when he had passed two-thirds of the distance, the sun shone brilliantly through the clouds. "This seems to have blinded him; he stopped a moment, then commenced his walk again, but uncertain and slowly. After a few moments he was seen tottering, and one of his knees bending on the rope. The crowd could scarcely breathe for anxiety. This fear was fully justified, for Blondin only went for a few minutes forward, then completely lost his

balance and fell on the rope, the swinging of which, occasioned by his fall, sent him again upwards, and he was hurled down in the abyss."

Three days later poor Blondin was buried—they do things quickly in America. "After a long search," proceeded the newspaper of October 15, 1859, "in the waters, his body was found and conveyed to New York. An immense number of people of all classes of society followed the remains to the Brooklyn Cemetery; the hearse was drawn by eight snow-white horses, and, in passing Union Square, was saluted with nineteen cannon shots from Tower Castle," etc.

A circumstantial account like this of the death and burial of any man would naturally be believed in the face of mere positive assertion to the contrary, and positive assertion was all that Blondin could oppose to it. The result was a controversy as to whether Blondin was above or below ground. One side, an interested side, maintained that he was dead and buried; the other side as strenuously maintained that he was still treading his hempen path across the surging Niagara. There was something of malice in the rumour of his death. He had been drawing so many people to the Falls from all parts of Canada and the States, that the hotel-keepers and amusement caterers in other parts voted him a "gol-darned nuisance." It was Blondin this, Blondin that, everywhere. Blondin hats, Blondin sticks, Blondin chains, Blondin railway excursions, and, worse than all, Blondin banks—boxes to put your money in till you had saved enough to take you 100 miles to see Blondin. The result was that no money was being spent on the established forms of entertainment. So those whose pockets were being thus drained thought the best thing they could do was to kill Blondin; and kill him they did, and bury him, too, in the way we have seen. Though unprincipled enough, this was certainly a much better way than that adopted in Spain. There the rope was actually cut because of its superior attraction to the bull-ring!

The only limit to Blondin's sensational feats on the rope was fixed by public opinion. More than one effort has been made to stop him, and on one occasion the Home Secretary was moved to interfere and restrain him from performing a feat that was too strong for the public nerve. This was the wheeling of his child across in a barrow full of flowers, which she scattered on each side from her giddy height as she went along. Of course, it was Blondin's business to create a sensation. It was for this that he was paid, and it was for this that people flocked to see him. To keep up the excitement he had to keep on outdoing himself, and his resourcefulness in this way did, perhaps, as much for him as his skill on the rope. "What shall I do next?" was a question he often put to himself; and whatever

A CORNER OF THE BILLIARD-ROOM.

occurred to him as suitable for an entertainment he did—without rehearsal too.

The bicycle performance, for instance, was first done at the Crystal Palace in public. The machine was brought to him from the makers while he was giving his show. He had never seen it before — he had never touched a bicycle before — yet he mounted it, and rode across the rope at a height of 100 ft. At that time, bicycles had the larger wheel in front. Blondin's, however, which was built after a design supplied by himself, had the smaller wheel in front, thus anticipating the present-day "safety." On this account, Blondin's machine looked very funny to the people of thirty years ago, just as the early patterns look funny to us.

THE BICYCLE PERFORMANCE.
(From an old print.)

Another feat that Blondin couldn't rehearse was performed at the Zoological Gardens, Liverpool. He had given an afternoon performance there, and was to perform again in the evening. During the interval between the performances, someone suggested playfully that it would be a fine thing for him to take a lion across. Capital idea, thought Blondin. So he indicated to the management his readiness to wheel across any lion they liked to send up to him. The lion chosen was eighteen months old, and was known as "Tom Sayers." The performance was in the open air, and it was just getting dark when the lion was slung up and strapped to the barrow. A pretty stiff gale was blowing. The rope sagged a good deal, too, so that there was a steep decline from each mast. It was, therefore, deemed advisable that some control should be kept over the barrow and its strange freight from the platform, in case Blondin might not be able to prevent it from running away with him down-hill. So a line was attached to the barrow to keep it in check, and the end of this was retained by an attendant on the platform at the mast-head.

"On walked Blondin," wrote an eye-witness of this unprecedented undertaking, "trundling his load before him, which must have been doubly difficult owing to his hands being fully engaged steadying himself with his pole, when, through some stupid bungling on the part of the individual who had charge of the line, the latter let it slip out of his hands. An exclamation of horror and surprise rang through the assembled masses, who, on this occasion, were said to number one hundred thousand spectators. The excitement now became intense, and those who had taken up positions immediately under the rope or hawser, betook themselves to less dangerous places, as everyone anticipated that the hero of this story would be precipitated, together with his comrade in danger, to Mother Earth. The wheelbarrow, deprived of its check, hurried onwards at a terrific pace; down, down the incline of rope with frightful rapidity. The line that had been let go became entangled in the topmost branches of some trees, whither it had fallen. The worst fears were now entertained, as it appeared evident that on the line becoming taut, Blondin would be either jerked off the hawser or prevented from reaching his destination—the opposite mast-head. The excitement at this stage was painful in the extreme, everyone being as silent as the grave, the destruction of this daring fellow being apparent and inevitable. Blondin, however, remaining motionless for a short time, like a statue in the elements, began to move slowly backwards; cheer after cheer arose from the vast concourse at this movement, and a feeling of relief settled upon all, and gave place to admiration at the splendid style in which he completed his extremely difficult backward journey." After a brief rest, Blondin set out again with "Tom Sayers," and accomplished the feat he had undertaken without a hitch.

AN ACROBATIC FEAT IN MID-AIR.
(From an old print.)

To one that knows Blondin it is not inconceivable that the letting slip of the check-line was intended. Indeed, I am tempted to believe that the accident at the Crystal Palace when this extraordinary man was knocked off the rope, was not altogether accidental. It is easier to believe this than that anyone engaged in assisting at a performance so full

of danger, would make such a stupid blunder as to take the barrow off the rope in a way that must inevitably have led to an upset so long as the law of gravitation endured.

Blondin is a consummate actor. He knows how to create a sensation, and he loves to do it, as who does not if only they have the power? See how he trips and stumbles when he is blindfolded! See how he strains and hesitates, and appears beaten at the most critical moments in his feats! Then he has a knack of dropping things—throws Punch out of his barrow, for instance, in a way that makes people shriek as they fancy they see Punch, Blondin, barrow and all come tumbling down.

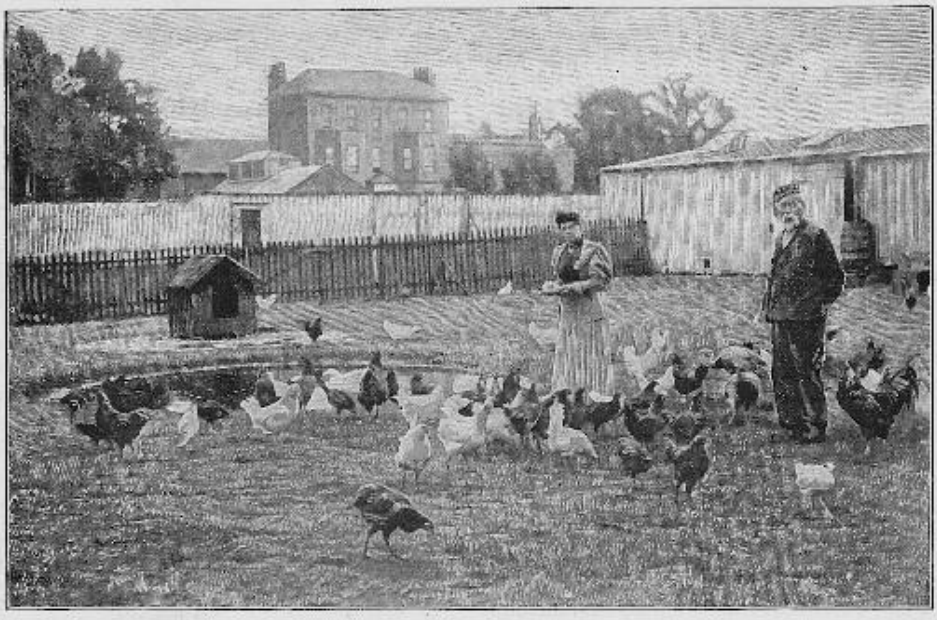
Blondin never practises and never rehearses. It is too great an undertaking to put up his apparatus. He never goes through a set programme either. When he has made up his mind to do certain things, he does them if he feels up to them and the weather is favourable. Sometimes he feels capable of doing anything on the rope, and then we have him at his best. At other times he is a "duffer," and then, like a sensible man, he confines himself to the more modest items in his *répertoire*.

We have seen how, without rehearsal, Blondin rode across his rope on a bicycle and how he wheeled "Tom Sayers" across, also without rehearsal. Another feat was suddenly sprung upon him in Melbourne. Walking down the streets one day, he was accosted by a retailer of musical instruments who offered him a harmonium if he would carry it across and play a tune on it in the middle of the rope. Blondin told the tradesman to send the instrument to his tent. This was done, and it was carried across and won.

It was always an exciting feature in Blondin's performances when it came to carrying a man across on his back. He would take any man that chose to come forward, but not women, though many have sought the distinction. The only woman he ever carried was his late wife. The heaviest man he has had on his rope weighed 18 stone, his own weight being only 12 stone. He offered to carry the Tichborne claimant; but the latter declined. When he performed before the Prince of Wales at Niagara, he was anxious to take His Royal Highness pick-a-back. The Prince, however, thought it sensation enough to be a simple spectator, and at the finish of the exhibition was so relieved as to exclaim:—

"Thank God, it is all over!"

At one time it was something of a fashionable craze to cross on Blondin's back, and so many were eager for the ride that applicants had to book in advance and pay a fee of £5.



BLONDIN AT HOME.
(From a photograph by H. Blondin, Brentford.)

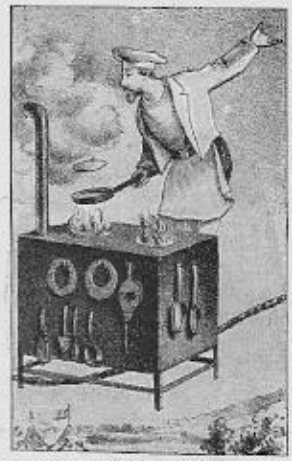
One night at the Alhambra an officer came to Blondin and said: "I cross on your back to-night." "Yes, if you are in the book." "What book?" Then it was explained to him that Blondin's back was booked for a fortnight. That was unfortunate, he said, as he had made a bet of £100 that he would cross that night. It was, therefore, arranged with the party whose turn it was to go across, that he should be satisfied with only one trip while the officer should do the return trip. Those carried across do not seem to have been always free from apprehension, for many even made their wills and arranged their affairs beforehand.

ABOVE THE ROPE.
(From an old print.)

It may appear singular that the rope Blondin now uses is only half the thickness of former ropes—viz., one inch and a half instead of three inches in diameter. That is due to the fact that a wire is now run through the rope and the necessary strength obtained at a less outlay of hemp and also money; of course, it only requires half the space when packed for travelling. It is packed in drums—each drum, when full, weighing a ton; there are thirteen such drums for conveying the main and subsidiary ropes.

Naturally Blondin has rope upon the brain! Quite a rope-like ridge runs from the front to the back of his head. It is a startling thing to feel. It is hard and bony, and due to standing so much on his head on the rope. The worst thing about Blondin's head just now, though, is the violent pains that suddenly attack it, and make the old hero's life for the time unbearable.

It is superfluous to detail Blondin's feats, for he has exhibited before millions, and those that have not seen him, have already heard. He has inspired the political cartoonist in every country—a frequent line being to represent a powerful politician throwing his opponents out of a barrow from a high rope. Abraham Lincoln, too, was once able to give a very pointed answer to a deputation that waited on him for the purpose of pointing out the errors and shortcomings of his administration. Honest Abe heard them patiently, and replied: "Gentlemen, suppose all the property you were worth was in gold, and you had to put it into the hands of Blondin to carry across the Niagara Falls on a rope, would you shake the cable, or keep shouting out to him, 'Blondin! stand up a little straighter; Blondin! stoop a little more; go a little faster; lean a little more to the north; lean a little more to the south'? No; you would hold your breath as well as your tongue, and keep your hands off until he was safe over. The Government are carrying an immense weight. Untold treasures are in their hands. They are doing the very best they can. Don't badger them. Keep silence, and we'll get you safe across."



COOKING IN THE AIR.
(From an old print.)

W. B. ROBERTSON.

[The illustrations to this article are from photographs by Mr. H. Blondin, Brentford.]