

## SKETCHES BY HUGH MILLER.

### The Dwarfie Stone.

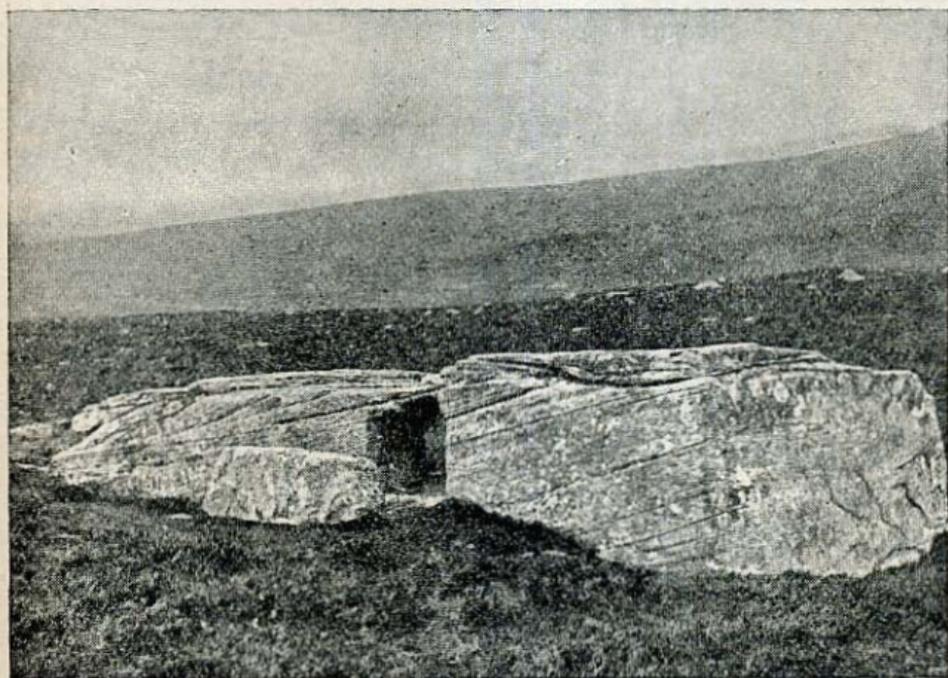


WE landed at Hoy, on a rocky stretch of shore composed of the gray flagstones of the district. They spread out here in front of the tall hills composed of the overlying sandstone, in a green, undulating platform, resembling a somewhat uneven esplanade spread out in front of a steep rampart. With the upper deposit a new style of scenery commences, unique in these islands. The hills, bold and abrupt, rise from fourteen to sixteen hundred feet over the sea-level; and the valleys by which they are traversed—no mere shallow inflections of the general surface, like most of the other valleys of Orkney—are of profound depth, precipitous, imposing, and solitary. The sudden change from the soft, low, and comparatively tame to the bold, stern, and high serves admirably to show how much the character of a landscape may depend upon the formation which composes it.

A walk of somewhat less than two miles brought me into the depths of a brown, shaggy valley, so profoundly solitary that it does not contain a single

human habitation, nor, with one interesting exception, a single trace of the hand of man. As the traveller approaches by a path somewhat elevated, in order to avoid the peaty bogs of the bottom, along the slopes of the northern side of the dell, he sees, amid the heath below, what at first seems to be a rhomboidal piece of pavement of pale Old Red Sandstone, bearing atop a few stunted tufts of vegetation. There are no neighbouring objects of a known character by which to estimate its size. The precipitous hill-front behind is more than a thousand feet in height; the greatly taller Ward Hill of Hoy, which frowns over it on the opposite side, is at least five hundred feet higher; and dwarfed by these giants it seems a mere pavier's flag, mayhap some five or six feet square by some eighteen inches to two feet in depth. It is only on approaching it within a few yards that we find it to be an enormous stone, nearly thirty feet in length by almost fifteen feet in breadth, and in some places, though it thins wedgelike towards one of the edges, more than six feet in thickness—forming altogether such a mass as the quarrier would detach from the solid rock to form the architrave of some vast gateway or the pediment of some colossal statue. A cave-like excavation, nearly three feet square, and rather more than seven feet in depth, opens on its gray and lichened side. The excavation is widened within, along the opposite walls, into two uncomfortably short beds, very much resembling those of the cabin of a small coasting vessel. One of the two beds is furnished with a protecting ledge and a pillow of stone hewn out of the solid mass; while the other, which is some five or six inches shorter than its neigh-

bour, and presents altogether more the appearance of a place of penance than of repose, lacks both cushion and ledge. An aperture, which seems to have been originally of a circular form, and about two and a half feet in diameter, but which some unlucky herd-boy, apparently in the want of some better employment, has considerably mutilated and widened, opens at the inner extremity of the excavation to the roof, as the



*The Dwarfie Stone.*

hatch of a vessel opens from the hold to the deck; for it is by far too wide in proportion to the size of the apartment to be regarded as a chimney. A gray, rudely-hewn block of sandstone, which, though greatly too ponderous to be moved by any man of ordinary strength, seems to have served the purpose of a door, lies prostrate beside the opening in front.

And such is the famous Dwarfie Stone of Hoy, as

firmly fixed in our literature by the genius of Sir Walter Scott as in this wide valley by its ponderous weight and breadth of base, and regarding which—for it shares in the general obscurity of the other ancient remains of Orkney—the antiquary can do little more than repeat somewhat incredulously what tradition tells him—namely, that it was the work many ages ago of an ugly, malignant goblin, half earth, half air, the elfin Trolld—a personage, it is said, that even within the last century used occasionally to be seen flitting about in its neighbourhood.

I was fortunate in a fine, breezy day, clear and sunshiny, save where the shadows of a few dense, piled-up clouds swept dark athwart the landscape. In the secluded recesses of the valley all was hot, heavy, and still; though now and then a fitful snatch of a breeze, the mere fragment of some broken gust that seemed to have lost its way, tossed for a moment the white cannach of the bogs, or raised spirally into the air, for a few yards, the light beards of some seeding thistle, and straightway let them down again. Suddenly, however, about noon a shower broke thick and heavy against the dark sides and gray scalp of the Ward Hill and came sweeping down the valley. I did what Norna of the Fitful Head had, according to the novelist, done before me in similar circumstances—crept for shelter into the larger bed of the cell, which, though rather scant, taken fairly lengthwise, for a man of five feet eleven, I found, by stretching myself diagonally from corner to corner, no very uncomfortable lounging-place in a thunder-shower. Some provident herd-boy had spread it over, apparently months before, with a littering of heath and

fern, which now formed a dry, springy couch ; and as I lay wrapped up in my plaid, listening to the rain-drops as they pattered thick and heavy atop or slanted through the broken hatchway to the vacant bed on the opposite side of the excavation, I called up the wild narrative of Norna and felt all its poetry.

The Dwarfie Stone has been a good deal undervalued by some writers, such as the historian of Orkney, Mr. Barry ; and, considered simply as a work of art or labour, it certainly does not stand high. When tracing, as I lay abed, the marks of the tool, which in the harder portions of the stone are still distinctly visible, I just thought how that, armed with pick and chisel, and working as I was once accustomed to work, I could complete such another excavation to order in some three weeks or a month. But then I could not make my excavation a thousand years old, nor envelop its origin in the sun-gilt vapours of a poetic obscurity, nor connect it with the supernatural through the influence of wild, ancient traditions, nor yet encircle it with a classic halo borrowed from the undying inventions of an exquisite literary genius.

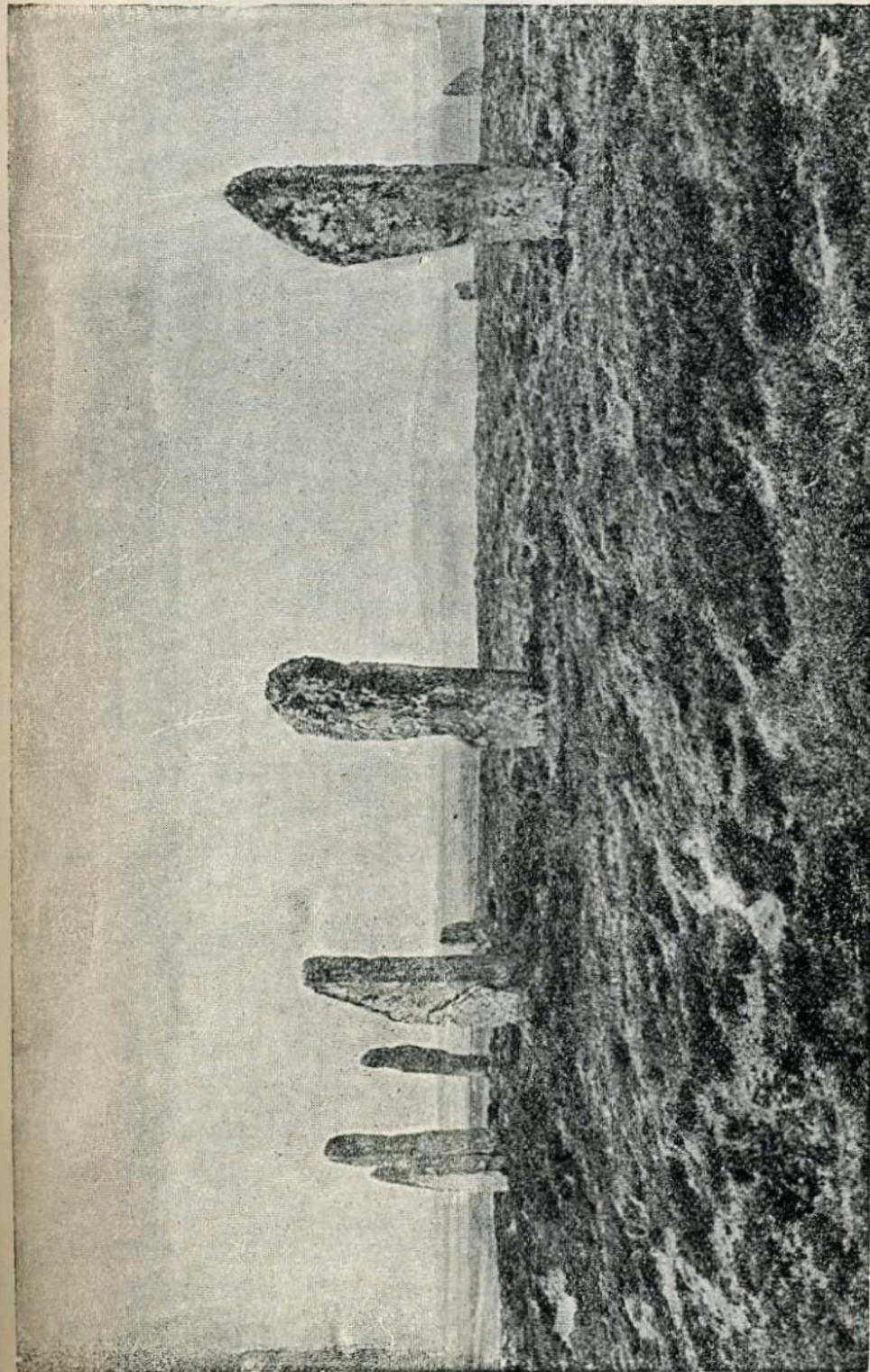
The pillow I found littered over with the names of visitors ; but the stone—an exceedingly compact red sandstone—had resisted the imperfect tools at the command of the traveller, usually a nail or a knife, and so there were but two of the names decipherable—that of an “ H. Ross, 1735,” and that of a “ P. Folster, 1830.” The rain still pattered heavily overhead, and with my geological chisel and hammer I did, to beguile the time, what I very rarely do—added my name to the others, in characters which, if both they and the Dwarfie Stone get but fair play, will be

distinctly legible two centuries hence. In what state will the world then exist, or what sort of ideas will fill the head of the man who, when the rock has well-nigh yielded up its charge, will decipher the name for the last time, and inquire, mayhap, regarding the individual whom it now designates, as I did this morning when I asked, "Who was this H. Ross, and who this P. Folster?"? I remember when it would have saddened me to think that there would in all probability be as little response in the one case as in the other; but as men rise in years they become more indifferent than in early youth to "that life which wits inherit after death," and are content to labour on and be obscure.

The sun broke out in great beauty after the shower, glistening on a thousand minute runnels that came streaming down the precipices, and revealing through the thin, vapoury haze the horizontal lines of strata that bar the hillsides, like courses of ashlar in a building. I failed, however, to detect, amid the general many-pointed glitter by which the blue, gauze-like mist was bespangled, the light of the great carbuncle for which the Ward Hill has long been famous—that wondrous gem, according to Sir Walter, "that, though it gleams ruddy as a furnace to them that view it from beneath, ever becomes invisible to him whose daring foot scales the precipices whence it darts its splendour."

### The Standing Stones.

The Standing Stones—second in Britain, of their kind, only to those of Stonehenge—occur in two groups; the smaller group (composed, however, of the taller stones) on the southern promontory, the



*The Standing Stones—The Ring of Brogar.*

larger on the northern one. Rude and shapeless, and bearing no other impress of the designing faculty than that they are stuck endwise in the earth, and form, as a whole, regular figures on the sward, there is yet a sublime solemnity about them, unsurpassed in effect by any ruin I have yet seen, however grand in its design or imposing in its proportions. Their very rudeness, associated with their ponderous bulk and weight, adds to their impressiveness. When there is art and taste enough in a country to hew an ornate column, no one marvels that there should be also mechanical skill enough in it to set it up on end; but the men who tore from the quarry these vast slabs, some of them eighteen feet in height over the soil, and raised them where they now stand, must have been ignorant savages unacquainted with machinery, and unfurnished, apparently, with a single tool.

The consideration, too, that these remains—eldest of the works of man in this country—should have so long survived all definite tradition of the purposes which they were raised to serve, so that we now merely know regarding them that they were religious in their uses—products of that ineradicable instinct of man's nature which leads him in so many various ways to attempt conciliating the Powers of another world—serves greatly to heighten their effect.

The appearance of the obelisks, too, harmonizes well with their great antiquity and the obscurity of their origin. For about a man's height from the ground they are covered thick by the shorter lichens—chiefly the gray-stone *parmelia*—here and there embroidered by the golden-hued patches of the yellow *parmelia* of the wall; but their heads and shoulders, raised beyond

the reach alike of the herd-boy and of his herd, are covered by an extraordinary profusion of a flowing beard-like lichen of unusual length—the lichen *calicarius* (or, according to modern botanists, *Ramalina scopulorum*), in which they look like an assemblage of ancient Druids, mysteriously stern and invincibly silent and shaggy as the Bard of Gray, when

“Loose his beard and hoary hair  
Streamed like a meteor on the troubled air.”

The day was perhaps too sunny and clear for seeing the Standing Stones to the best possible advantage. They could not be better placed than on their flat promontories, surrounded by the broad plain of an extensive lake, in a waste, lonely, treeless country, that presents no bold competing features to divert attention from them as the great central objects of the landscape; but the gray of the morning or an atmosphere of fog and vapour would have associated better with the misty obscurity of their history, their shaggy forms, and their livid tints than the glare of a cloudless sun, that brought out in hard, clear relief their rude outlines, and gave to each its sharp, dark patch of shadow. Gray-coloured objects, when tall and imposing, but of irregular form, are seen always to most advantage in an uncertain light—in fog or frost-rime, or under a scowling sky, or, as Parnell well expresses it, “amid the livid gleams of night.” They appeal, if I may so express myself, to the sentiment of the ghostly and the spectral, and demand at least a partial envelopment of the obscure. Burns, with the true tact of the genuine poet, develops

the sentiment almost instinctively in an exquisite stanza in one of his less-known songs, "The Posie,"—

"The hawthorn I will pu', wi' its locks o' siller gray,  
Where, like an aged man, it stands at break o' day."

Scott, too, in describing these very stones, chooses the early morning as the time in which to exhibit them, when they "stood in the gray light of the dawning, like the phantom forms of antediluvian giants, who, shrouded in the habiliments of the dead, come to revisit, by the pale light, the earth which they had plagued with their oppression, and polluted by their sins, till they brought down upon it the vengeance of the long-suffering heaven." On another occasion he introduces them as "glimmering, a grayish white, in the rising sun, and projecting far to the westward their long, gigantic shadows." And Malcolm, in the exercise of a similar faculty with that of Burns and of Scott, surrounds them, in his description, with a somewhat similar atmosphere of partial dimness and obscurity:—

"The hoary rocks, of giant size,  
That o'er the land in circles rise,  
Of which tradition may not tell.  
Fit circles for the wizard's spell,  
Seen far amidst the scowling storm,  
Seem each a tall and phantom form,  
As hurrying vapours o'er them flee,  
Frowning in grim obscurity,  
While, like a dread voice from the past,  
Around them moans the autumnal blast."

There exist curious analogies between the earlier stages of society and the more immature periods

of life—between the savage and the child; and the huge circle of Stennis seems suggestive of one of these. It is considerably more than four hundred feet in diameter; and the stones which compose it, varying from three to fourteen feet in height, must have been originally from thirty-five to forty in number, though only sixteen now remain erect. A mound and fosse, still distinctly traceable, run round the whole; and there are several mysterious-looking tumuli outside, bulky enough to remind one of the lesser moraines of the geologist. But the circle, notwithstanding its imposing magnitude, is but a huge child's house after all—one of those circles of stones which children lay down on their village green, and then, in the exercise of that imaginative faculty which distinguishes between the young of the human animal and those of every other creature, convert, by a sort of conventionalism, into a church or dwelling-house, within which they seat themselves and enact their imitations of the employments of their seniors, whether domestic or ecclesiastical. The circle of Stennis was a circle, say the antiquaries, dedicated to the sun. The group of stones on the southern promontory of the lake formed but a half-circle, and it was a half-circle dedicated to the moon. To the circular sun the great rude children of an immature age of the world had laid down a circle of stones on the one promontory; to the moon, in her half-orbed state, they had laid down a half-circle on the other; and in propitiating these material deities they employed in their respective enclosures, in the exercise of a wild, unregulated fancy, uncouth, irrational rites.