First published in Household Words, 16 April 1853, this article was written in collaboration with Henry Morley. The text reproduced here is that published in The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens. Harry Stone suggests that Dickens wrote the portion from the opening to ‘undergone or seen’, and from ‘The copies’ to the conclusion.

The subject of this paper is not—as from its title might at first seem probable—the individual who never will go home on affectionate persuasion, to save the life of his nearest and dearest relative. Nor is it that other individual who leaves mysterious trunks, horses, ponies, greyhounds, gigs, watches, wheelbarrows, down long-suffering yards or in patient lodgings, where they run into debt and must at last be sold, unless fetched away within fourteen days. Nor is it that Somebody who appears to have an unaccountable objection to come forward and hear of something to his advantage; nor that impalpable creature who from year’s end to year’s end is in a convulsive state of advertisement about a lever, or an anchor, or a dove, or a scorpion, or a trumpeter, or a turbot, or some other cabalistic sign tending to the general confusion and madness. H. W. is the shorter name for Household Words by which this Journal is familiarly known among the persons employed in its production; and we purpose to describe the processes by which this Journal is produced.

We have already described the manufacture of paper. But before we can possibly go to the printer’s we have to dispose (as we know to our cost) of our Voluntary Correspondent. We will give our readers some account of him in his most irrational aspect.

His name is Legion. He writes everything—on every description of paper, and with every conceivable and inconceivable quality of illegible ink. Like the players in Hamlet, nothing comes amiss to him; “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical, historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited.” But if he particularly excel in any one species of composition, it is perhaps, as to our experience, in the poem unlimited.

He has a general idea that literature is the easiest amusement in the world. He figures a successful author as a radiant personage whose whole time is
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devoted to idleness and pastime – who keeps a prolific mind in a sort of corn-sieve, and lightly shakes a bushel of it out sometimes, in an odd half hour after breakfast. It would amaze his incredulity beyond all measure, to be told that such elements as patience, study, punctuality, determination, self-denial, training of mind and body, hours of application and seclusion to produce what he reads in seconds, enter into such a career. He has no more conception of the necessity of entire devotion to it, than he has of an eternity from the beginning. Correction and re-correction in the blotted manuscript, consideration, new observation, the patient massing of many reflections, experiences and imaginings for one minute purpose, and the patient separation from the heap of all the fragments that will unite to serve it – these would be Unicorns or Griffins to him – fables altogether. Hence, he can often afford to dispense with the low rudiments of orthography; and of the principles of composition it is obvious that he need know nothing.

He is fond of applying himself to literature in a leisure hour, or “a few leisure moments.” He “throws his thoughts” upon paper. He rarely sends what he considers his best production. His best production is not copied – somehow, it seldom is. He is aware that there are many remarkable defects in the manuscript he encloses, but if we will insert that, “on the usual terms,” he has another at home that will astonish us. He is not at all vain, but he “knows he has it in him.” It is possible that it may be in him; but it is certain that under these circumstances it very, very, seldom comes out.

Sometimes he will write, without sending anything, to know “if we are open to voluntary contributors?” He will be informed “Yes, decidedly. If their contributions be adapted to these pages.” He will then write again, to know what style of contribution would be preferred? He will be informed in answer that he had better try his own style. He writes back, to the effect that he has no style, no subject, no knowledge, and nothing to tell; and will therefore feel obliged to us for a few suggestions.

He calls sometimes. When he calls, he has often been a captain or a major. He comes with a foregone conclusion that we are always sitting in a padded chair (after a little early corn-sieve practice) open, like some competition of a sporting nature, to All England. He takes it very ill that we don’t see him. Considers it ungentlemanly. Had supposed we were a public character, and doesn’t understand it. He comes on behalf of a gifted friend, with a tragedy in five acts, a poem in twelve books, or a story that would occupy a volume or two of this publication. He brings it out of a cab, and leaves it in the office, rolled up in paper like a whitey-brown bolster. It bears evident traces of having been in every other office in the wide world, whence any composition in the English language is disseminated
through the agency of print and paper. He is written to, and politely informed that the excessive bulk of this treasure renders it (without reference to its intrinsic merits or demerits) quite unsuitable as a blessing to the unhappy H. W. He reappears with all speed, red-faced and irreful, reproduces card, demands explanatory interview, and terrifies publisher. Nothing coming of it, he, on the spot, indites a letter, wherein he communicates to us that as we decline to accept the contribution of his gifted friend, he requires to be informed in writing, for the information of his gifted friend, what our critical opinion is, in detail, of the boister, and what publisher we recommend for it; for which critical opinion he will call to-morrow afternoon at four precisely. He is again politely written to and informed that we cannot undertake to form and deliver such opinion, having our little hallucinations and labouring under the delusion that we have something else to do. Then he reappears with the cab, and takes the boister away in extraordinary dudgeon; protesting to the last that he had supposed we were a public character, and that he don't understand it.

She (God bless her! – Mrs. or Miss Legion) is not so angry, but she is an unreasonable Angel, too. She brings little beneficent schemes in bags of Berlin wool, and, though they won't suit us, thinks they will suit our friends: among whom she begs us to distribute two hundred and fifty copies. She is the most amiable woman in the world – but she is impracticable; she is, indeed, though we love her! She brings the flattest and thinnest of little crimson or blue books, published by subscription, and wants to read them to us aloud. When she writes, it is on scented paper, highly glazed, over which all the letters seem to skate, and all the looped letters to tumble down. Her favorite title for poetry is “To a Child,” or “To —.” We don't know who — is, but we wish he would lead her to the altar. In prose, she addresses the Gentle Reader constantly, and sprinkles with French words. She is invariably persuaded that blanks heighten the interest, and convey an air of reality. She generally begins, “It was on a summer evening in the year eighteen hundred and (blank), near the pretty little town of (blank), where the (blank) river murmurs its rippling way among the rushes, that a youth of handsome mien and fine figure, who might have numbered two-and-twenty summers, and whose expressive countenance was cast in the pure Greek mould.” Occasionally, she presents herself in the serious aspect of having some relative to support, and is particularly deserving of the gentlest consideration and respect. Then it is our misery to endeavour to explain to her that what is written for publication can be read for its own merits only; and that it would be as hopeful a resource to play a church organ without any knowledge of, or aptitude for, the instrument, as to play
the muse's lyre. In any case and every case, she always forms a profound conviction (and will die in it) that we have never read her manuscript.

What inventors write and come, and what people with grievances of immense duration, and often real grievances too, we will not endeavour to set forth. What numbers of people suppose that to smuggle manuscripts in at our private door is a means of beguiling us into despatching them by express to the printer, instead of an infallible means of delaying their consideration, we will not record. Through how many of these various rocks and shoals every devoted number of H. W. steers its course, our readers may infer from the following facts. In the last year, we read nine hundred manuscripts, of which eleven were available for this journal, after being entirely re-written. In the same period, we received and answered two thousand letters, and made appointments with an odd two or three hundred more of our fellow creatures than there were pounds to pay for the celebrated nails in the horse's shoes, which will go down to posterity rusty with the tears of school-boys. On the other hand, it is delightful to state that five of our very best regular fellow labourers first became known to us, as volunteers, at various periods within the three years and upwards of our existence; and that some remarkable descriptions in this Journal have come to us from wholly unaccustomed writers, who have faithfully and in thorough earnest put down what they have undergone or seen.

Let us suppose a Number of H. W. "made up." In other words, let us suppose the articles it is to contain, their length, their nature, their order of succession, all duly calculated, considered, and decided on. We then go to the printer's.

Since the whole mind of our own nation finds its way into type, a London printing-office is a sort of compound brain, in which the busy working of the thoughts of the community are represented by the rapid flowing of the fount of lead between the fingers of compositors. Permutations and combinations of the letters of the alphabet are carried on incessantly upon the premises of Messrs. Bradbury and Evans, the printers of H. W., and the work of the printer goes on there, as elsewhere, with a rapidity that would have made the blood flush to the head of Guttenberg, or Faust, or Peter Schaeffer. Really the world is not greatly to be blamed for idleness, when we consider that it is, after all, only about four hundred years since the art of printing was invented. The legend of the men of Strasburg, who will have it that their townsman Johann Mentelin cut the first types of wood and strung them like beads, side by side, and that Guttenberg was prompted by a runaway from Strasburg—Mentelin's servant, Gänsefisch (by interpretation Goose meat) — is but among the tales of yesterday. When the art of
of printing was invented, more than half the knowledge of the best educated portion of the world was nothing beyond what had been taught two thousand years before.

As for the acres of white paper and the ponds of writing ink, the mileage of finger movement that precede the issue of each week's allowance of print to the world, it is enough for us to have indicated how much of that comes under our notice in connexion with the printing of H. W., which is dispersed every week over the country. It is indeed not easy to forget the past when our attention is directed to the mass of printer's labour that is set in action by the pence of our subscribers. When the first printers used their types on the first printed Bible, they were in despair because it had cost them four thousand florins by the time they had printed to the end of the twelfth sheet; and the works issued by them, though some ten times cheaper than written copies, were still what we should now think enormously expensive.

The most familiar portion of the printer's work, as it is done at this day, it is not necessary to describe. Few do not know how the scrap of written paper, placed conveniently before him, is regarded by the compositor in the most literal sense as the production of a man of letters; and how all the author's a's and b's, translated into lead, are reproduced with an impartial fidelity that never troubles itself to consider whether it is reproducing sense or nonsense. From the types arranged, line under line, in lines of a fit length, forming a long column, a rough impression is taken of each article upon three or four long slips of paper, as a proof of the accuracy of the printer's handiwork. A reader in the printing-office then corrects all errors of the kind for which that office is responsible. The printer's work being made so far accurate, and fresh proofs having been printed, those are sent to the office; to which the responsibility attaches of the truth and fitness of the literary workmanship. Alterations are then often made in the matter or the manner of the article. In that case the compositors undo much that they have done; and, with the expedition of good generals, break up their lines to form them again into solid columns. The work of two-fold correction has then of course to be repeated.

The long irregular columns broken into detachment of an equal size, are paired into pages again. Two pages are wedded and bound together, and then, bondage within bondage, four of these couples are wedged within an iron frame or chase, into a square. A set is thus made of eight pages, cunningly arranged with a view to the subsequent folding of the half sheet of paper upon which they will be printed at a single stroke. H. W. is in this form and in this form only, we would hope a desperately heavy journal. The mass of type prepared thus for eight pages of a number contains more.

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than forty thousand separate fragments of type, and weighs eighty-seven pounds and a half.

Three such iron-bound tablets of lead contain the matter of one number; and, from these, several proofs are again struck for final correction and revision. When the last amendments have been made, and all is so far accounted satisfactory, the frames containing the compositors' work are carried down into the domains of Vulcan: for H. W. never appears until it has gone through fire and water.

The two hundred and sixty-two pounds and a half weight of unpublished H. W. are taken down into a vault, which may be regarded as a workshop of Vulcan by reason of the strong fire-heat that is in it. We observe, too, by the light of its three furnaces, a pan of Vulcan's broth boiling-hot lead soup in a corner. In other respects we might take the workers in this hot cave for the Miller and his men; for they are all covered with a white dust, and white is the prevailing colour of all the splash and soil that is to be seen about the walls and floors and benches. There is a bin filled with white powder in the middle of the room; and, from one corner, there proceeds the sound of water flowing from a tap. In another corner is a gas-jet; for the gloom natural to this workshop on the basement story is dispelled by gas.

Each stereotype plate is the casting of two pages. The workman takes therefore one pair of leaden pages bound in its frame, lays it before him and beats upon its surface with a broad, flat wooden mallet. The blows of the mallet are intended to abase all stuck-up leads, and to produce a perfect evenness upon the surface of the type from which it is designed to make a casting. After they have had their beating the two pages are carried to another part of the long work-bench, or dresser, that runs along the wall; and, being set down by another workman near the water tap and sink, are covered with a thin cream. "Plaster of Paris mixed with water," the stereotyper tells us. "That's for the quads."

"O yes, certainly. The quads of course. By the bye, what are the quads!"
"Quadrats, sir. We call 'em quads."
"Exactly. Yes. And so you take a casting?"
"Bless you, no, sir, you don't seem to understand. Quads are the spaces left between the paragraphs that come white on the paper. If you look here, at this page that is set-up, you will see that they are deeper than the spaces left between the words and letters regular little trenches. We don't want any of them. We must have all the spaces of an equal depth."

"And so you cover the whole mass with a thin mud of plaster; which that mischievous young monkey there is washing off again."
"Yes, he's bound to do that, and then I, with a soft brush, go and rub at it; but, look you, my brush sweeps the plaster from about the letters and between them, but it passes over the top of the deep quads and smooths it into them. I made the heights all even with a mallet, now I'm evening the depths with plaster and a hair-brush."

Cunning workman, you are understood. You need not explain why you in the next place with a delicate touch wipe fine oil over the types you have prepared; you are about to take a casting of those pages of the work whose title you and your brethren so irreverently shorten.

A collar is placed about the lump of H. W. which fits it, and sticks up around it, sloping outwards. The type and its new collar together make a pudding-pan; and, into the pan plaster pudding—mixed by hand in a large bowl—is, in the next place, carefully poured. Carefully, because at first it must be rubbed and smoothed, and perfectly insinuated between every crevice; the sharp outline of no letter must be rounded by a bubble. When the pan is full, the pudding stands to set, the top of it being in the meantime scraped smooth and flat. In less than a quarter of an hour, it is firm enough to be lifted by its frame, upon the bevelled sides of which it is supported, and the heavy types, forming the false bottom to the pan, are left behind. A plaster cast, shaped like a little Yorkshire pudding, has upon one side of it an accurate impression of those two pages of H. W. The characters inscribed thus upon pudding remind one very much of Nineveh and Babylon, but not at all of sixteen, Wellington Street North, Strand, London. Since this cast is the mould or sop which will be dipped presently into the pan of Vulcan's gravy, "you see, sir," says the cunning workman, "if I hadn't made the back of it quite even, the hot lead would lie more on one part than another, and the plaster then would crack. Next-a-ways all the damp must be got out, and so we put the casts into these ovens to be dried. They want care. I don't understand what they want in thermometer degrees, but I know the exact heat by practice—this way: with my bare arm thrust into the oven."

The mould being quite dry, the demonstrator takes a piece of metal that resembles it in shape and size. "This," he says, "is a float. You see there's a rim round the cast side of the mould. The plaster was allowed to run down for the purpose of a making of it. I just smooth that with a knife, and nick it in a place or two, and lay the plaster cast side downwards, on the float. Now when that goes into the metal, metal can flow in between the nicks. Nextly here is the great pan without a lid, full of metal whereof stereotype plates are made; six parts lead, hardened with one part antimony. The metal's now at melting heat. Here's a crane over it, with a fixed plate
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hanging to it. Under the plate we put the plaster mould, with the float or swimming jacket under that, and down they all go for a warm bath. Now you see the float won't sink willingly, and the plate fastened to the crane can't rise: the plaster is between the two, and the float at the bottom. What's the results? The float pushes the plaster up, and keeps it fastened tight with its flat back against the plate above it. The metal forces in between the notches, but the float won't be shoved down by the metal, and forces that up consequently into every cranny of the plaster mould. What's the results again? We take it out and cool it with a little water, and there you have two pages of H. W. stereotyped on one plate — beautiful to look at! Just like a married couple."

From this plate the two pages will be printed, if it be not found faulty in another room, to which we follow it. It is there subjected to the criticism of another censor; who looks through it letter by letter, picks it over with a graver, and rejects it if it contain any flaw that cannot be removed in his department. If accepted by him it is subjected to further treatment. The pair of pages, now existing as a solid plate, will be again united under the printing press with the pairs from which it had parted; they will all meet again in their new form, and when they do meet, it will be as necessary that the separate stereotype plates should lie evenly side by side under the paper, as that the letters in each plate should present a level surface. Their edges are therefore cut by a machine. Their backs are first smoothed by a turning lathe. They are then placed on a flat table, and passed under a blade, so adjusted as to produce among all plates submitted to its cutting scrutiny, an almost perfect uniformity of thickness. Out of this room the plate of H. W., containing as we have said two pages, is sent to be used in its place for the actual printing of a weekly number.

Under the press, however, it is again subjected to criticism. The plates that belong together are slipped into nests prepared for their reception; of which the outer rims print off as borders to the pages. An impression is then taken, upon paper, of the entire set of pages, and the printed sheet is carefully examined; faults corrected, and then the great steam-press begins its labour. Under its two revolving cylinders are grouped the plates which represent the two halves of the forthcoming number of H. W. The two halves correspond to the two sides of our weekly sheet. Upon a peak covered with snowy paper that commands the upper surface of one cylinder there is a youth. He dexterously fits the paper, sheet by sheet, upon the lips of the devouring engine. As it heaves and works, the paper is drawn rapidly into a black abyss. It is rolled over the mass of metal characters, which is perpetually fertilised with printer's ink by mystic rollers. One cylinder
passes the sheet printed upon one side, to another. Over that it leaps, and from under that it is delivered perfect, and placed quietly upon a table, ready to the fingers of a little boy, who helps it in its easy birth. The press works, one among many that appear to be engaged in voluntary labour side by side. Men and boys are reaping the advantage of their industry. Our youth upon the peak administers white sheets of paper to the busy monster labouring on our behalf. As fast as they are put into its mouth, like great square lozenges, they are all sucked away at the rate of nine hundred an hour. At the same rate, completely printed copies of H. W. are laid upon the table of the second boy and piled by him into a cube. The dimensions of the cube are constantly kept under by other boys who carry parts of it away. But our H. W. is not even yet ready to appear before the public.

Who does not entertain a proper horror of damp sheets? The sheets of H. W. are sent out of the great hall of steam-presses into a drying room. There they are hung up and aired. The sheets of H. W. are in the next place mangled. They endure a whole day under a powerful hydraulic press. The sheets of H. W. are neatly folded by the tidy hands of women.

The copies of each number which has in this way run the gauntlet down so long a lane of labour, are, at last, brought by boys upon their heads, upon their shoulders, upon their backs, upon their breasts, over their arms, and under them, to sixteen, Wellington Street North, in the Strand. From that place, on a given day, and punctually after a given hour, they are issued to a race of individuals who carry them away in bags, in pouches, in pockets; in hands, on heads, shoulders, backs; in cabs, in carts, and in trucks to the warehouses and shops of the metropolis to be sold to the public. From the warehouses they travel in detachments to the railway stations, and from railway stations many travel to the ships. So each number at last finds its owner out, who by some article he sees in it is perhaps prompted to become a sensible Voluntary Correspondent, and send up to H. W. a little bag — or a large sack — of grist. So the mill goes.