

A FORGOTTEN WATERING-PLACE.



PARKGATE, as every one knows—or rather as every one did know once—is situated on the Cheshire side of the Dee estuary, about eleven miles from Chester.

There was a time in its history when a minute description of its whereabouts would have been unnecessary—for who in the good old times was ignorant of the existence of Parkgate?

Its empty wharves were once filled with merchandise, and noisy with the bustle that attended the arrival and departure of the Irish packets and Bagillt and Flint ferry-boats. Its deserted esplanade and beach were once thronged with the wealth and fashion of the neighbouring counties, while its inns—of which some ten have disappeared within the memory of the inhabitants—were filled with travellers *en route* for the Emerald Isle and stations upon the Welsh coast. Sly smugglers pursued their hazardous work under the very eyes of the custom-house officers, and many a rich cargo found its way into mysterious cellars and vaults, some of which still exist, and were apparently fashioned for the purpose.

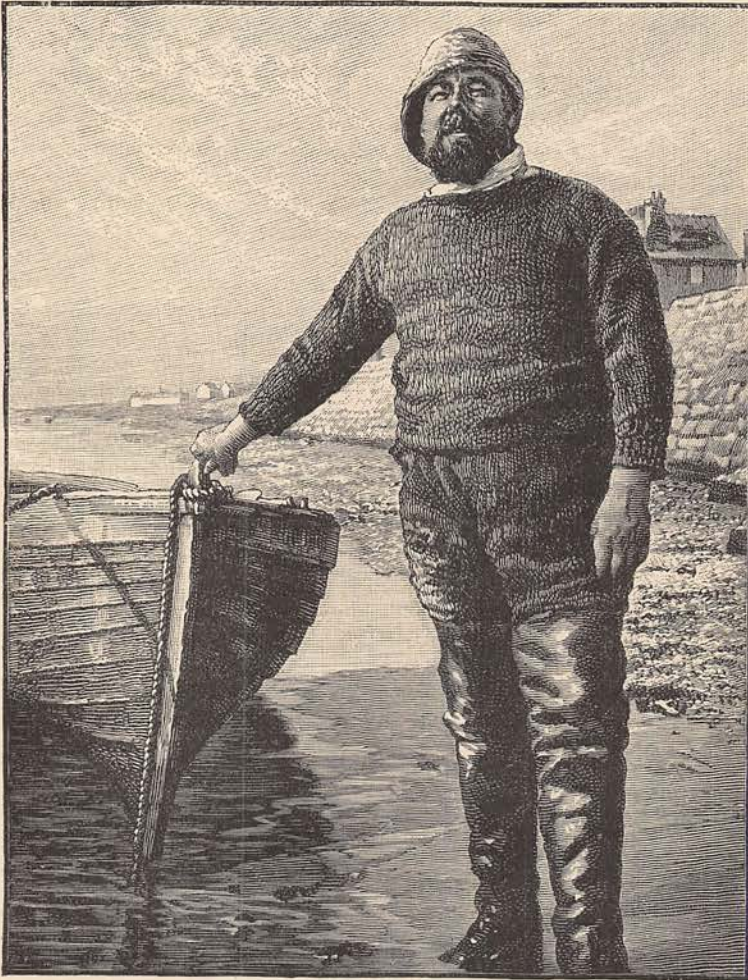
The former things have, however, passed away. The shrill horn of the mail-coach no longer wakes the echo of the quiet highway, and heralds the arrival of the latest news from the capital. The anchor-smiths, ropemakers, tide-waiters, postboys, bathing-machine people, and artificers of various kinds have gone and left no trace, save the record of their names and avocations in the parish registers. The ropewalk exists only in its name, and the old building attached to it forms a friendly shelter for cattle. A heap of ruins marks the site of the "Boathouse Inn," which once rang with the mirth of merry travellers as they awaited the advent of the Liverpool coach; and a few stumps projecting here and there out of the mud, are all that remains of the old landing-stage. A huge anchor, half embedded in the mud, forms a striking contrast to the anchors of the little shrimping fleet, and awakes the wonder of the fishermen's children, as it lies, a mockery of the emblem of hope, by the quay-wall. The coastguard station survived until a dozen years ago, and the coastguards, as they strutted about the promenade with large telescopes, and a very large amount of dignity, lent an air of importance to the place which it has not since possessed. Nothing remains as it was. Wrapt in the contemplation of its former grandeur, the hamlet sits like Babylon of old—desolate and forgotten!

It was hoped that the line of rail which now connects it with the large towns, would open up a new era of prosperity; but with all its natural advantages, its bracing air, its panoramic views of the Welsh coast, where, beyond the estuary, mile after mile of landscape stretches away to a range of mountains which lose themselves in the distance, and with all its struggles to keep up appearances, Parkgate retains but a faint semblance of its former self. The sandbanks have blockaded the once flourishing watering-place and trading mart, until all that was essential to its prosperity has fallen before their silent advance. The neighbouring marshes, gemmed with tiny lakes and streamlets, and dotted with sheep, are annexing yard after yard of territory as they steal year by year over the sandy river-bed. Already they have invaded the precincts of the ancient "Old Quay Ferry House," now a landlocked farmstead.

A common-place phrase which is in constant use at Parkgate, describes better than any other short sentence could the present condition of the locality. Address an interrogatory as to the past history, present state, or future prospects of the place, to one or other of the sturdy fishermen whom you will find mending their nets upon the quay, or to the melancholy-looking landladies who display the universal "bit of pasteboard" in the sitting-room windows, and the reply in most cases will be, "Parkgate has had its day." From the air of sad conviction, and the decided shake of the head, which invariably accompany the assertion, you may gather that the Parkgate of the time referred to would compare very favourably with the Parkgate of the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and eighty-seven. If further confirmatory evidence of the fact were needed, it could be found in the appearance of the lodging-houses themselves. They one and all have the indescribable appearance of having seen better days. Centuries of storm, fresh from conflict with the deep, have swept across the estuary and battled with the pointed gables and time-honoured roofs. Springtides, leagued with the tempest, have, over-leaping every barrier, oftentimes knocked loudly upon the windows, and wrestled with the walls.

There are honourable scars half hidden by plaster and cement, but the majority of the lodging-houses still stand, and strive, by means of clean blinds and frequent applications of paint and whitewash, to preserve a remnant of their former respectability. Alas! the cardboard referred to is perpetually peering through the old-fashioned casements, the apartments are always "to let," and, excepting in the height of the season, the "takings" barely suffice to perpetuate the existence of the traditional lodging-house cat.

Parkgate is rich, however, in memories of the past. There are those among the white-haired fishermen and old inhabitants, who can recall the time when long rows of bathing machines lined the shore, and



A PARKGATE FISHERMAN.

(From a Photograph by Mr. J. A. Dochray, Billericay, Essex.)

can give you tolerably long lists of the people of rank—most of whom have passed away—who once made Parkgate their annual resort, and disported themselves in its tide. When many of the popular watering-places of the present day were unknown, or had not been puffed into notice, Parkgate was in the zenith of its fame. Travellers by the packets discovered that its breezes blew back the colour into pale cheeks, with surprising rapidity, that want of appetite was an unknown complaint in the district, and very soon the place was besieged with invalids and pleasure-seekers from far and near. Royalty itself, in the person of George III., is said to have been among the number who honoured the "Parade" with their presence.

Midway between Parkgate and the heather-clad slopes of Heswall, lies Gayton Hall, the ancient seat of the Gleggs, an old Cheshire family. Here

William III. stayed a night, while upon his way to Ireland to "make history," and rewarded his host with a knighthood. The fleet lay at anchor below.

The memory of one not less famous than these is associated with Parkgate. In one of the battered lodging-houses facing the river, or more probably in the far-famed Mostyn Hotel—now an academy for young gentlemen—Handel wrote the *Messiah*. It is recorded that he wrote his masterpiece while upon the journey from Parkgate to Dublin, and it is almost certain that it was written during his stay at Parkgate, for it is known that he went up to Chester to try it over on the cathedral organ. There is no local tradition as to the exact house at which he lodged. The great master went as he came, unnoticed and unknown.

They manage these things very differently upon the

Continent. A loquacious guide would show you the very room where he wrote that which was to endure for all time, and you would look with becoming reverence upon the very table where the immortal strains were penned! The landscape is, we know, the same. He has looked out upon the same prospect of field and valley. Cloud-capped Moel Fammau* and the distant range of mountains whose tops blend with the sky, even as Time mingles with Eternity, wore the same aspect as to-day. As he wrote, the voices of merry children playing upon the beach, the noise that attended the going and coming of the packets, and the rumble of coach and postchaise, must have been heard outside. He has passed among the giddy throng, upon the Parade, and talked with the boatmen in his guttural German accent, and no one has suspected that in their midst walked one whose name would live when they and all their works had passed away and were forgotten.

There are those who would barter the quietude of this neglected spot for the frivolity of the modern watering-place, but there are others—including the writer—who would not have it other than it is. When one has been brushing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men in the city, a season of contact with the simple honesty, which seems an inherent quality of the fishermen, is a good and wholesome thing.

While I have been writing, the tide, which has been lapping lazily at the crevices in the quay wall, has ebbed slowly away. Troop after troop of cockle-gatherers—picturesque in print bed-gowns and linsey petticoats—have passed on to the sandbanks, which lie whitening in the sun, and, pressing on to the distant cockle-beds, have become mere moving specks in the distance. Anon, the sun sinks into “a sea of blood mingled with fire.” The daylight dies out slowly behind the Isle of Hilbre; lights begin to flicker like glowworms upon the opposite coast, and—it is night.

E. KERNS.

THREE OLD MAIDS.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.



IT was an evening in October at Brighton. There was a certain house facing the sea where the gas was lighted, but the blinds not yet drawn down.

Passers-by glanced with various feelings into that handsome, comfortable room: with sympathy, amusement, admiration, or bitter envy.

It was a very common scene, thank Heaven! merely an ordinary family gathering. Father, mother, sons and daughters, all together at home, and busy in various little ways: learning lessons, sewing, reading.

Dr. Henry had just come in by the London express, and he not only glanced into the room, but stopped a moment and smiled. Before he went back to town, he hoped—and he had very good hopes too—that there would be a prospect of just such a bright home for him. A doctor ought to have a wife, so it was a wise as well as an agreeable step; and he did not look the kind of man to take it if it were not.

He feasted his eyes for a moment on the lovely face of a girl near the window, delightfully tantalising his own impatience; then, unable to wait another second, he gave a vigorous, impatient knock at the front door, and was shown into the midst of the family circle, and a passer-by would have seen—but the girl at the window pulled the blind down.

* Mother of the Hills.

“I am glad you happen to have come now,” said the head of the family. He was an ex-military man, Major Goldie, and possessed considerable private means, besides his pension. “My wife and girls are uninteresting; they can talk about nothing but dress and furniture.”

Mrs. Goldie looked up, smiling. “We are not quite so bad as that, but we really are rather busy. Dear Grace’s wedding comes off in a fortnight, and Mr. Wilmot wrote yesterday to ask Grace and me to run down to Devonshire to-morrow, to consult about some alterations.”

Dr. Henry looked at Grace, the bride-elect, then at Agnes, the girl near the window, and wondered “how any fellow with eyes in his head,” &c. &c.: precisely what James Wilmot had thought, reversing the names.

“How is Wilmot? pretty well?”

“Yes, I think so, except for a cold; he got very wet while he was fishing the other day.”

“You must always have dry clothes ready for him, Grace, and see that he puts them on,” suggested her father.

“Oh, father, don’t you remember the proverb about taking the horse to water?” laughed Grace.

“Wouldn’t it be better not to fish?” mischievously suggested Agnes. But Dr. Henry took the opportunity to turn to her with such a brilliant look of admiration and love, as if she had made the wittiest, cleverest speech, that she was obliged to look down to hide her eyes, and did not venture upon another remark for a long time.

“I am afraid you and Grace will be awfully tired