

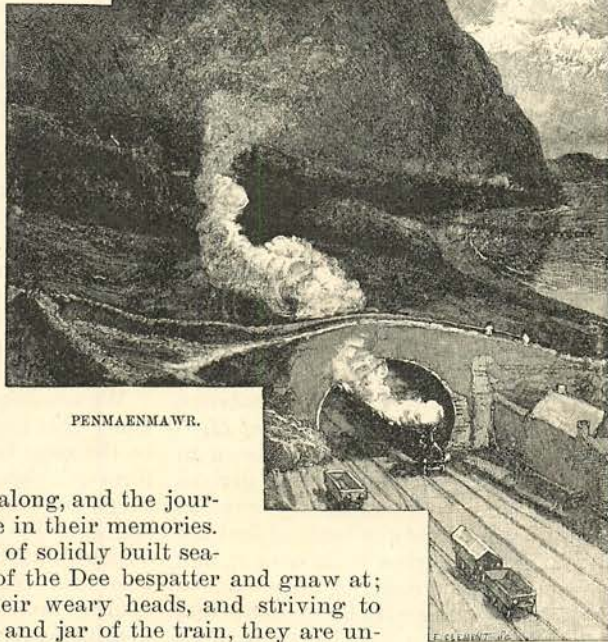
THE ROUTE OF THE WILD IRISHMAN.

BY WILLIAM H. RIDEING.

THIS wild Irishman is the fast train which carries the American mails from London to Holyhead, *en route* to Dublin and Queenstown. It drives down from Euston to Chester at a speed of forty miles or more an hour, and issuing from that quaint, gabled, and galleried city through a gap in the splendid walls, it continues on its course to Holyhead along the picturesque shores of North Wales.

Many Americans travel by it, as in leaving or in joining the Atlantic steamer at Queenstown they can save several hours by taking this route, but it is usually night when they are borne along, and the journey finds no dwelling-place in their memories. They miss the long reaches of solidly built sea-wall which the high tides of the Dee bespatter and gnaw at; and while propping up their weary heads, and striving to shut their senses to the jolt and jar of the train, they are unconsciously flying under the embattlements of historic castles, along the base of sea-washed mountains, and through the great iron tube which bridges the Menai Strait. Precipitous cliffs frown down upon the meteor-like train: on one side are the stormy waters of the St. George's Channel, and on the other the mountains descend without any intervening foot-hills; but by means of tunnels, embankments, and viaducts every natural obstacle in the route of the Wild Irishman has been overcome.

The distance between Chester and Holyhead is accomplished in less than two hours; a tubular bridge spans the Menai Strait, the ferrying of which formerly led to many tragedies; another bridge is hung over the Conway River, and Penmaen-



PENMAENMAWR.

mawr is pierced by a tunnel, through which the train winds like a ring through the nose of a savage.

When the train leaves Chester it almost immediately crosses the boundary line between Cheshire and North Wales, and for the rest of the distance to Holyhead it is in that country. The Dee is visible out of the carriage windows, like a brazen serpent crawling over a desert of mud and sand. At high-water the whole space between the banks is overflowed, but as the ebbing tide withdraws it only leaves a winding rivulet, which is of little use to any except the smallest craft. Once the river was wide and deep, but the channel has been shoaled by the washings of the hills, and the traffic which belonged to the Dee has sought the Mersey. Only a narrow tongue of land which Cheshire thrusts out separates the two rivers, and a little below Chester we can see from the windows of the Wild Irishman the place where they meet and mingle.

On the other side of the train lies a country of increasing hilliness—a landscape like that of England, with trim hedges, thatched cottages, and the solid-looking sculpturesque foliage which is a sort of atonement for the persistent humidity of the climate. Hawarden, Mr. Gladstone's seat, is about two miles off the line, and about twenty minutes after leaving Chester the train runs close against the walls of Flint Castle—a gaunt mass of naked rock, upon which decay has set no sign of regret, and age has put no assuaging mantle. The castle was built by Edward I., and Shakespeare has made its "rude ribs" and "tattered" battlements one of the scenes in his play of *Richard II.*

Behind the hills which slope down to Flint is Holywell, a town which derives its name from a miraculously copious spring, of such efficacy in healing that the beautiful gothic shrine built over it, and ascribed to the generosity of the mother of Henry VII., is hung with the crutches and trusses of those who have been cured by bathing in it.

Beyond Holywell and Mostyn nearly every village along the coast aspires, with some success, to be a watering-place. The climate is salubrious, but how bleak, how Novemberish, to us who have just escaped from the Senegambian fervor of the American July! The thermometer is down below 60°, but the women are dressed in muslins and poplins, and the children, digging

and building in the sands, are bare-legged and bare-shouldered.

The Wild Irishman scarcely slackens its speed at Rhyl, the flat and rectangular little watering-place whose noisy excursionists from Lancashire and Yorkshire bathe in a yellow mixture of mud washed down from the Dee and the Mersey, and we also will pass it by, leaving it, with Abergeley, Llandulas, and Colwyn Bay, to tourists who have time to see the coast in detail. But presently we cross a river which, flowing down from between high hills, empties into the sea within sight of the train, at a point where a massive headland juts outward, and reaching the farther side, we are borne under the shadow of a cliff-like wall. We look out and up, and there are towers, battlements, and parapets. These are so high, and the train is so close to the base, that we have to almost dislocate our neck in order to see the summit. It is a castle, not a cliff; but it seems to grow out of the rock upon which it stands, and when it was built nature and art joined hands to give it a double strength.

When Edward I. had conquered the Welsh he built three great castles to keep the vanquished down, and though dismantled and despoiled, they are still very substantial examples of the architecture of his time: one is at Carnarvon, another at Beaumaris, and the third is this at Conway, the common name of the river which we have just crossed, the castle, and the little town which lies under the castle, shut within a harp-shaped wall which formerly had twenty-four round towers.

We are disposed to take Pennant's word when that antiquary declares Conway to be the most beautiful of fortresses. The form is oblong, placed in all parts on the verge of precipitous rock. One side is bounded by the river, one by a creek which fills with every tide, and the other two face the town. Within are two courts, around which are the various apartments, or what remains of them. But the banqueting hall has tumbled into the kitchen, and the Queen's boudoir is scarcely recognizable from the dungeon cell. No roof or rafters remain, and the grass grows on the floor of the Council Chamber. The cold wind rushes through the empty fireplaces, the windows have nothing in them except the vines, and the winding stairways only go up a few steps, and then leave us standing on the brink



CONWAY CASTLE.

of some ragged gap. Ivy, moss, and grass have taken hold even of the highest towers, and the only pomp is the pomp of age.

We look at the smooth river issuing between the hills to the sea, and the quaint town and its little houses shut within the triangular walls. That headland of which we have spoken once or twice is the Great Orme's-Head, one of the most conspicuous points to all vessels passing up and down the channel, and between it and a similar though smaller elevation we can see some of the roofs of Llandudno, one of the most delightful of watering-places. But all other things are dwarfed in comparison with Penmaenmawr, which now looms up, and we can pity the travellers who, before the days of the Wild Irishman, found this shoulder of rock—a very cold shoulder indeed—thrust in their way.

Change is visible everywhere about the castle, and some thrifty husbandman is raising cabbages and potatoes in the moat. Other parts of the grounds are also turned to account as vegetable gardens, and the gate has no more formidable guard than a little girl in a blue pinafore. But while we sat eating our luncheon at the inn adjoining the castle we were reminded that though the relics of mediæval chivalry belong to museums, the love of military glory is still as strong in the female breast as it was before the watch on the ramparts had become a noiseless spectre. The little waitress was in a flutter of intense excitement. Some Volunteers, with faces as red as their uniforms, who had been encamped outside, were leaving the town, and she was divided between her anxiety to be attentive to us and her desire to look out of the window at them. "Will you have some cheese, sir?" "Yes, ma'am; they're the Volunteers." She tried hard to control herself, but she was carried away in her ecstasy, and we saw her run to the window and bring her hands together as if to applaud. Her pink face beamed, and the ribbons in her lace cap danced. "Oh, if you please, ma'am, doesn't the band play lovely!" she exclaimed, in a burst of rapture; and then she looked frightened, and hurried back to the table to give us our coffee.

A minute or two after the train leaves Conway the mountains begin to crowd down upon the Wild Irishman, and threaten to shove the line into the sea. It

is these that the traveller from America sees from the deck of the ocean steamer as she passes up the St. George's Channel to Liverpool. They are a northern spur of the Snowdon range, and among the huddled masses rises one, a very Gibraltar of a peak, higher than all the rest. This, which strangers often mistake for Snowdon itself, is Penmaenmawr, the *via mala* of the old route to Holyhead, upon which many a traveller has come to grief between the crumbling strata of the mountain on one side and the unprotected precipice on the other. The road was grooved in the mountain, and, says Nicholson, writing of it as it was before the day of the Wild Irishman: "The amazingly abrupt precipice, variegated with fragments and ruins, presents a scene of horror. In some places rocks of vast magnitude, which have probably fallen from the summit, lodge on projecting ledges, and appear in the act of taking another bound." But carried along by this fast train, we have only the momentary darkness of a tunnel to remind us of what Penmaenmawr was a century ago. The Wild Irishman stops nowhere, not even at the little cathedral city of Bangor, and it hurries us on to the Menai Strait, which resembles the Hudson at Tarrytown. Villas and cottages are visible everywhere, and building sites are held at a very high price.

Once again we are in darkness, but this time the reverberations are not those of a tunnel. The sounds are hollow and metallic; we are crossing the strait by the vast tubular bridge which Stephenson built between 1846 and 1850, and which put an end to the frequent accidents that had previously occurred to passengers crossing by the ferry. The Britannia Bridge, as it is called, consists of eight tubes resting on three towers, and it spans the stream at a height of 104 feet. It is 1841 feet long, and the tubes are said to contain 11,400 tons of iron. Some fellow-passenger is sure to put us in possession of these dimensions, but we who have seen the Brooklyn Bridge can listen unmoved, and give him in return the statistics of a much greater achievement.

One end of the bridge—that by which we enter—is in Carnarvonshire, and when we reach the other we are in the island of Anglesey, the Mona of early English history, and the last refuge of the Druids. It is not a very large island, only twenty

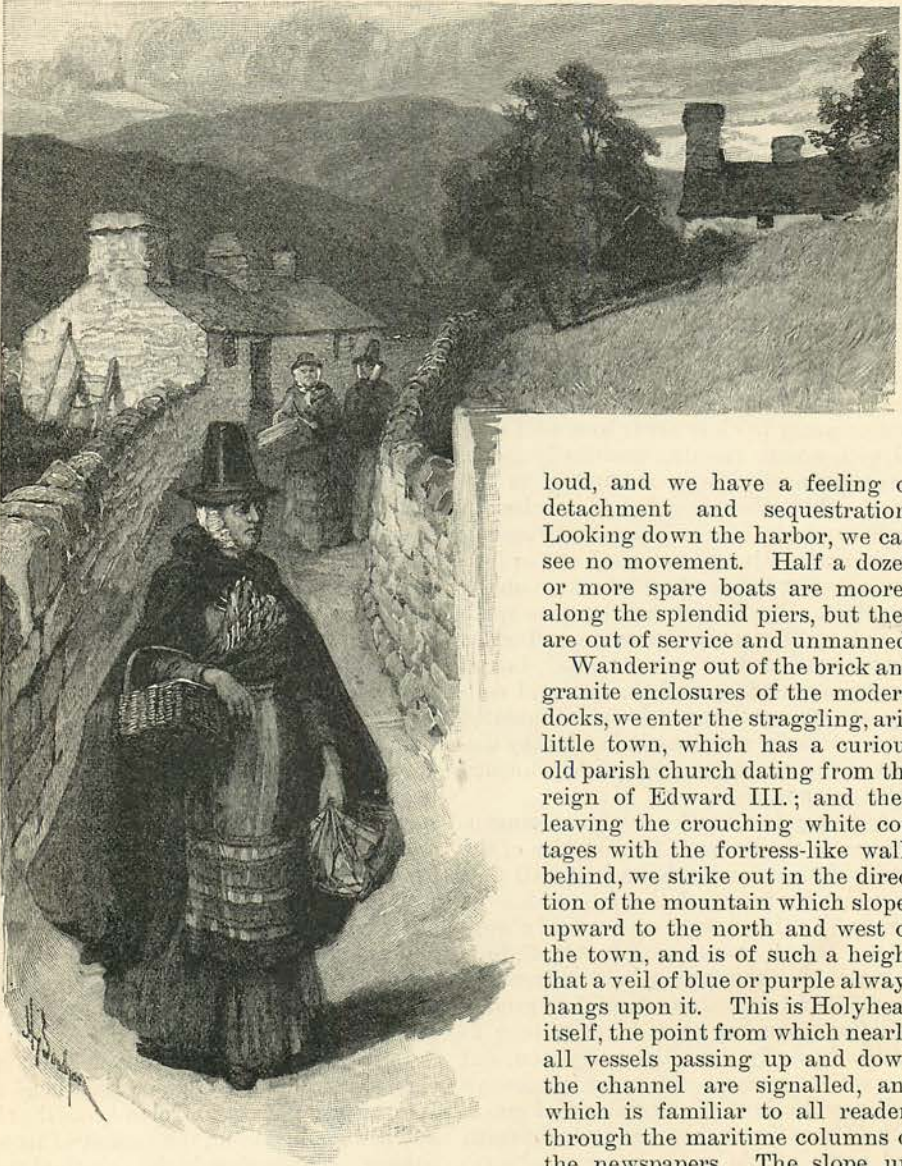
miles from north to south, and twenty-eight miles from east to west. The surface is rolling and (if such a word can be employed to describe anything in nature) commonplace, but, except in the straits, the seaward edge is a long line of cliffs of varying height, at whose feet many a ship has come to grief. There are many Druidical remains on the island, cromlechs and other enigmatical masses of stone which the old hierarchy of the woods has left unexplained, and it was in Anglesey that Suetonius burned the last of the Druids in their own altar fires. Tacitus has painted the wild scene which opened upon the Roman forces when they landed: the motley army in close array and well armed, with women running frantically about, their dishevelled hair streaming in the wind, while they brandished torches in their hands, and the priests moving among them, and, with arms reached out to heaven, uttering the most awful curses on the invaders. The Roman soldiers were spell-bound, and for some time were, as Tacitus puts it, resigned to every wound; but at length, aroused by their leader, and calling on one another not to be intimidated by a womanly and fanatic band, they displayed their ensigns, and quickly hushed their antagonists.

Anglesey has another claim to remembrance, as the home of the founder of the Tudor dynasty, who danced so well that he won the heart of the fair widow of Henry V. The queen, says an old chronicler, "beyng young and lustye, following more her own appetyte than frendely consaill, and regardyng more her private affection than her open honour, toke to husband privily a goodly gentyman, and a beautiful person, garnized with manye godly gyftes, both of nature and of grace, called Owen Teuther, a man brought forth and come of the noble linage and aun-cient lyne of Cadwalader, the last Kyng of the Britonnes." Some courtiers who were sent to Wales to ascertain the condition of the Tudors found Owen's mother seated in a field with her goats around her; but there is no doubt that, though reduced in circumstances, the family was of high descent.

A few miles from Holyhead we pass within a short distance of Aberffraw, the seat of the native princes of Wales, and thus the Wild Irishman completes its course, and lands us at the gangway of the channel steamer. The lubgrubious

passage is not for us this time; and knowing what it is, we watch the other passengers embark with feelings of pity. It is not an affair of eighty or ninety minutes, like that from Dover to Calais, or from Folkestone to Boulogne. It takes fully five hours, and the sea gives the steamer that irregular, eccentric motion which nothing can resist. It is a gusty and rainy expanse, and it is seldom peaceful or sunny. Few who have made it think of it except with abhorrence, and to recall it is to have visions of wet and slippery decks, pelting showers of spray, gray, low-hung clouds, and angry-looking waters. The steamer is sheltered in a large masonry dock, but, looking out to the mouth of the harbor, we can see the waves spattering over the breakwater, and a sallow-hued anticipation of discomforts to come is visible in the faces of those who are stumbling down the narrow gang-plank. There are members of Parliament, government messengers, sportsmen, tourists, and commercial travellers. There are few English people, but many Americans, who could be identified by their enormous iron-clad trunks if they were not individualized in other ways. The transfer from the train to the boat is quickly effected. Saratogas, knapsacks, gun-cases, fishing-rods, bicycles, and despatch-boxes are rushed on board after the passengers, and then the mail is heaped upon the deck. The bags are lettered with the names of American cities, and while we are speculating on their contents the little steamer starts, and in a very few minutes passes out beyond the breakwater into the open sea.

It is then that we discover what an empty, noiseless little place Holyhead is. It is the nearest port to Ireland, and that is, and always has been, the reason of its existence. The harbor is the principal part of it now, as it was years ago, when there were no steamers, and the vessels used were small sail-boats, which often took four or five days in making the passage between here and Dublin. Vast sums have been spent on its beacons, and on the long granite breakwater, the granite docks, and the lofty sheds lighted by electricity. There are rumors that some day it will be the terminus of a line of transatlantic steamers, which, by using it, will avoid the fogs and tidal delays of the Liverpool bar; but in the mean time it has the appearance of a premature expansion. Af-



MARKET-DAY ON THE NORTH WELSH COAST.

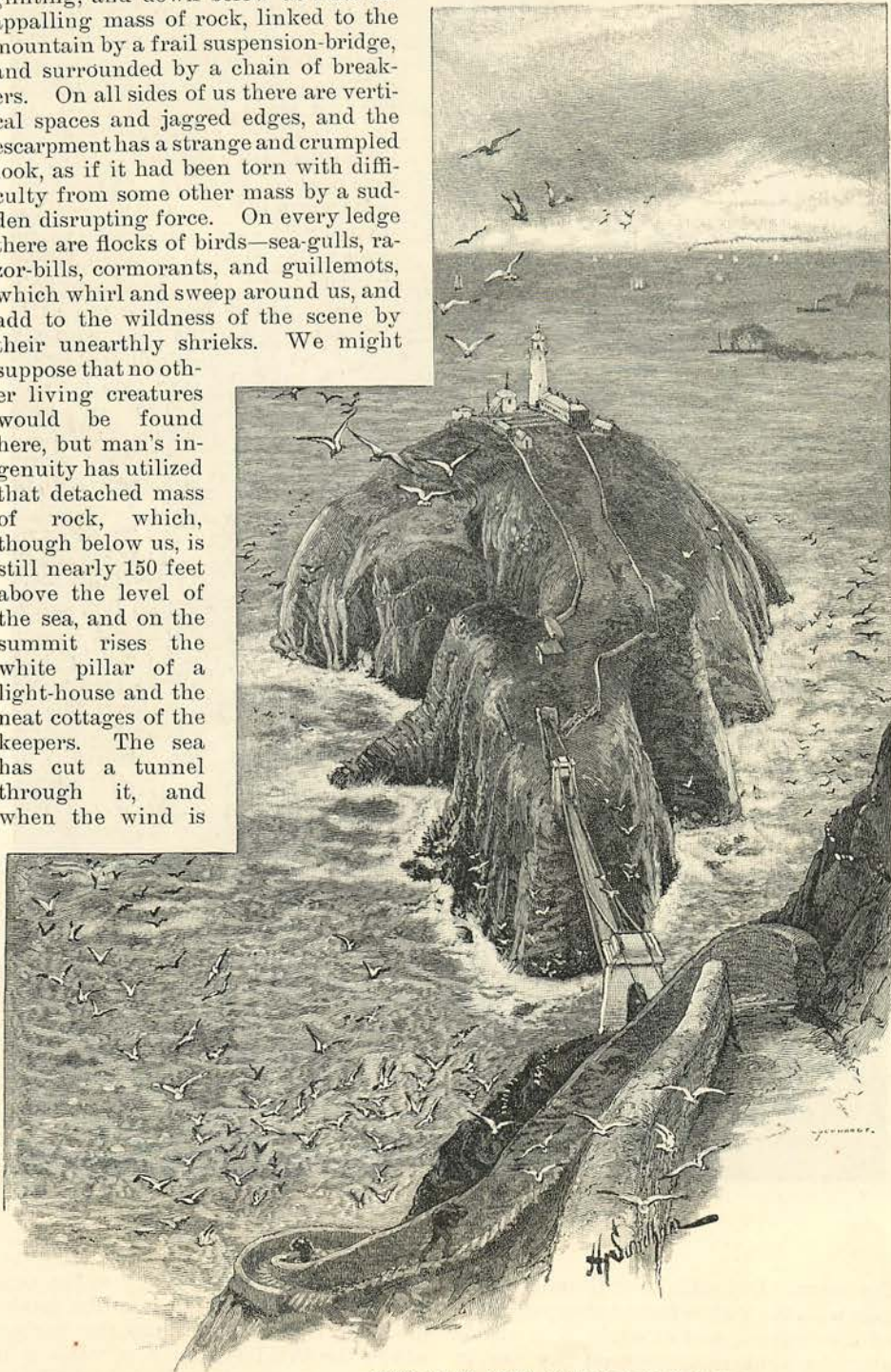
ter the departure of the mail-boat it suddenly becomes silent and sepulchral still. The vociferous newsboy, the wharfingers, the porters, and the railway and steam-boat officials all disappear. The ticket-office windows are abruptly closed, and the pensive attendant in the refreshment-room turns the lock on the mildewed veal pies and the sawdust sandwiches, which have reminded us of Mugby Junction. Our footsteps sound boisterously

loud, and we have a feeling of detachment and sequestration. Looking down the harbor, we can see no movement. Half a dozen or more spare boats are moored along the splendid piers, but they are out of service and unmanned.

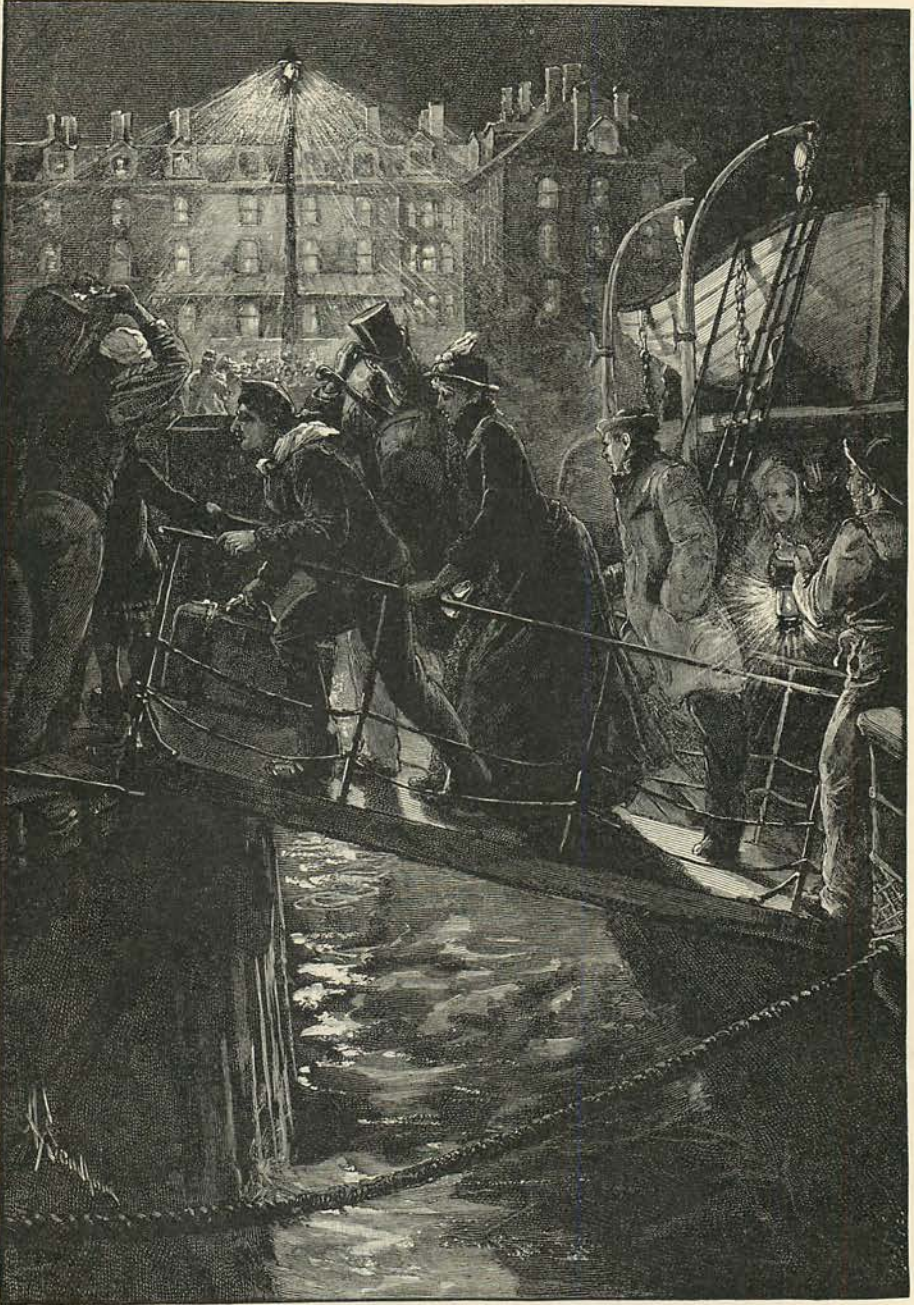
Wandering out of the brick and granite enclosures of the modern docks, we enter the straggling, arid little town, which has a curious old parish church dating from the reign of Edward III.; and then leaving the crouching white cottages with the fortress-like walls behind, we strike out in the direction of the mountain which slopes upward to the north and west of the town, and is of such a height that a veil of blue or purple always hangs upon it. This is Holyhead itself, the point from which nearly all vessels passing up and down the channel are signalled, and which is familiar to all readers through the maritime columns of the newspapers. The slope upward from the harbor and town forms a buttress to the wall which the mountain presents to the sea, and from the summit we can look down as dizzy and terrifying a precipice as there is on the coast of North Wales. The face of the rock is scarred and seamed in an extraordinary manner, and at its base the sea has bored several enormous caverns and alcoves, one of which, called the Parliament House, is seventy feet high. Our path up the slope is through some rocky, heather-strewn fields, and then over the shoulder of the mountain, and down a

steep stairway in the cliff. The sea reaches out before us, quivering and glinting, and down below us rises an appalling mass of rock, linked to the mountain by a frail suspension-bridge, and surrounded by a chain of breakers. On all sides of us there are vertical spaces and jagged edges, and the escarpment has a strange and crumpled look, as if it had been torn with difficulty from some other mass by a sudden disrupting force. On every ledge there are flocks of birds—sea-gulls, razor-bills, cormorants, and guillemots, which whirl and sweep around us, and add to the wildness of the scene by their unearthly shrieks. We might suppose that no other living creatures would be found here, but man's ingenuity has utilized that detached mass of rock, which, though below us, is still nearly 150 feet above the level of the sea, and on the summit rises the white pillar of a light-house and the neat cottages of the keepers. The sea has cut a tunnel through it, and when the wind is

high the spray is carried over the suspension-bridge which loops the outer cliff with



SOUTH STACK LIGHT AS SEEN FROM HOLYHEAD.



ARRIVAL OF MAIL STEAMER AT HOLYHEAD.

the inner. But, whirl and thunder as the gale will, the waters have never yet reached the lantern, and at night it is visible over the whole of Carnarvon Bay, and in conjunction with the light on the Sker-

ries, this on the South Stack, as the rock on which we are looking is called, guides the boat from Dublin into the harbor, where the Wild Irishman is waiting to retrace its way to the noisy metropolis.