

XXXVI. THE OLD CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, AND THE DEAD-HOUSE

The floating chapel recalls to mind the "Old Church," well known to the seamen of many generations, who have visited Liverpool. It stands very near the docks, a venerable mass of brown stone, and by the town's people is called the Church of St. Nicholas. I believe it is the best preserved piece of antiquity in all Liverpool.

Before the town rose to any importance, it was the only place of worship on that side of the Mersey; and under the adjoining Parish of Walton was a chapel-of-ease; though from the straight backed pews, there could have been but little comfort taken in it.

In old times, there stood in front of the church a statue of St. Nicholas, the patron of mariners; to which all pious sailors made offerings, to induce his saintship to grant them short and prosperous voyages. In the tower is a fine chime of bells; and I well remember my delight at first hearing them on the first Sunday morning after our arrival in the dock. It seemed to carry an admonition with it; something like the premonition conveyed to young Whittington by Bow Bells. "Wettingborough! Wettingborough! you must not forget to go to church, Wettingborough! Don't forget, Wettingborough! Wettingborough! don't forget."

Thirty or forty years ago, these bells were rung upon the arrival of

every Liverpool ship from a foreign voyage. How forcibly does this illustrate the increase of the commerce of the town! Were the same custom now observed, the bells would seldom have a chance to cease.

What seemed the most remarkable about this venerable old church, and what seemed the most barbarous, and grated upon the veneration with which I regarded this time-hallowed structure, was the condition of the grave-yard surrounding it. From its close vicinity to the haunts of the swarms of laborers about the docks, it is crossed and re-crossed by thoroughfares in all directions; and the tomb-stones, not being erect, but horizontal (indeed, they form a complete flagging to the spot), multitudes are constantly walking over the dead; their heels erasing the death's-heads and crossbones, the last mementos of the departed. At noon, when the lumpers employed in loading and unloading the shipping, retire for an hour to snatch a dinner, many of them resort to the grave-yard; and seating themselves upon a tomb-stone use the adjoining one for a table. Often, I saw men stretched out in a drunken sleep upon these slabs; and once, removing a fellow's arm, read the following inscription, which, in a manner, was true to the life, if not to the death:--

"HERE LYETH YE BODY OF TOBIAS DRINKER."

For two memorable circumstances connected with this church, I am indebted to my excellent friend, Morocco, who tells me that in 1588 the Earl of Derby, coming to his residence, and waiting for a passage to the

Isle of Man, the corporation erected and adorned a sumptuous stall in the church for his reception. And moreover, that in the time of Cromwell's wars, when the place was taken by that mad nephew of King Charles, Prince Rupert, he converted the old church into a military prison and stable; when, no doubt, another "sumptuous stall" was erected for the benefit of the steed of some noble cavalry officer.

In the basement of the church is a Dead House, like the Morgue in Paris, where the bodies of the drowned are exposed until claimed by their friends, or till buried at the public charge.

From the multitudes employed about the shipping, this dead-house has always more or less occupants. Whenever I passed up Chapel-street, I used to see a crowd gazing through the grim iron grating of the door, upon the faces of the drowned within. And once, when the door was opened, I saw a sailor stretched out, stark and stiff, with the sleeve of his frock rolled up, and showing his name and date of birth tattooed upon his arm. It was a sight full of suggestions; he seemed his own headstone.

I was told that standing rewards are offered for the recovery of persons falling into the docks; so much, if restored to life, and a less amount if irrecoverably drowned. Lured by this, several horrid old men and women are constantly prying about the docks, searching after bodies. I observed them principally early in the morning, when they issued from their dens, on the same principle that the rag-rakers, and

rubbish-pickers in the streets, sally out bright and early; for then, the night-harvest has ripened.

There seems to be no calamity overtaking man, that can not be rendered merchantable. Undertakers, sextons, tomb-makers, and hearse-drivers, get their living from the dead; and in times of plague most thrive. And these miserable old men and women hunted after corpses to keep from going to the church-yard themselves; for they were the most wretched of starvelings.