

VII - THE PILCHARD FISHERY.

If it so happened that a stranger in Cornwall went out to take his first walk along the cliffs towards the south of the county, in the month of August, that stranger could not advance far in any direction without witnessing what would strike him as a very singular and alarming phenomenon.

He would see a man standing on the extreme edge of a precipice, just over the sea, gesticulating in a very remarkable manner, with a bush in his hand; waving it to the right and the left, brandishing it over his head, sweeping it past his feet--in short, apparently acting the part of a maniac of the most dangerous character. It would add considerably to the startling effect of this sight on the stranger, if he were told, while beholding it, that the insane individual before him was paid for flourishing the bush at the rate of a guinea a week. And if he, thereupon, advanced a little to obtain a nearer view of the madman, and then observed on the sea below (as he certainly might) a well-manned boat, turning carefully to right and left exactly as the bush turned right and left, his mystification would probably be complete, and the right time would arrive to come to his rescue with a few charitable explanatory words. He would then learn that the man with the bush was an important agent in the Pilchard Fishery of Cornwall; that he had just discovered a shoal of pilchards swimming towards the land; and that the men in the boat were guided by his gesticulations alone, in securing the fish on which they and all their countrymen on the coast depend for a livelihood.

To begin, however, with the pilchards themselves, as forming one of the staple commercial commodities of Cornwall. They may be, perhaps, best described as bearing a very close resemblance to the herring, but as being rather smaller in size and having larger scales. Where they come from before they visit the Cornish coast--where those that escape the fishermen go to when they quit it, is unknown; or, at best, only vaguely conjectured. All that is certain about them is, that they are met with, swimming past the Scilly Isles, as early as July (when they are caught with a drift-net). They then advance inland in August, during which month the principal, or "in-shore," fishing begins; visit different parts of the coast until October or November; and after that disappear until the next year. They may be sometimes caught off the south-west part of Devonshire, and are occasionally to be met with near the southernmost coast of Ireland; but beyond these two points they are never seen on any other portion of the shores of Great Britain, either before they approach Cornwall, or after they have left it.

The first sight from the cliffs of a shoal of pilchards advancing towards the land, is not a little interesting. They produce on the sea the appearance of the shadow of a dark cloud. This shadow comes on and on, until you can see the fish leaping and playing on the surface by thousands at a time, all huddled close together, and all approaching so near to the shore, that they can be always caught in some fifty or sixty feet of water. Indeed, on certain occasions, when the shoals are of considerable magnitude, the fish behind have been known to force the fish before, literally up to the beach, so that they could be taken in buckets, or even in the hand with the greatest ease. It is said that they are thus impelled to approach the land by precisely the same necessity which impels the fishermen to catch them as they appear--the necessity of getting food.

With the discovery of the first shoal, the active duties of the "look-out" on the cliffs begin. Each fishing-village places one or more of these men on the watch all round the coast. They are called "huers," a word said to be derived from the old French verb, huer, to call out, to give an alarm. On the vigilance and skill of the "huer" much depends. He is, therefore, not only paid his guinea a week while he is on the watch, but receives, besides, a perquisite in the shape of a per-centage on the produce of all the fish taken under his auspices. He is placed at his post, where he can command an uninterrupted view of the sea, some days before the pilchards are expected to appear; and, at the same time, boats, nets, and men are all ready for action at a moment's notice.

The principal boat used is at least fifteen tons in burden, and carries a large net called the "seine," which measures a hundred and ninety fathoms in length, and costs a hundred and seventy pounds--sometimes more. It is simply one long strip, from eleven to thirteen fathoms in breadth, composed of very small meshes, and furnished, all along its length, with lead at one side and corks at the other. The men who cast this net are called the "shooters," and receive eleven shillings and sixpence a week, and a perquisite of one basket of fish each out of every haul.

As soon as the "huer" discerns the first appearance of a shoal, he waves his bush. The signal is conveyed to the beach immediately by men and boys watching near him. The "seine" boat (accompanied by another small boat, to assist in casting the net) is rowed out where he can see it. Then there is a pause, a hush of great expectation on all sides. Meanwhile, the devoted pilchards press on--a compact mass of thousands on thousands of fish, swimming to meet their doom. All eyes are fixed on the "huer;" he stands watchful and still, until the shoal is thoroughly embayed, in water which he knows to be within the depth of the "seine" net. Then, as the fish begin to

pause in their progress, and gradually crowd closer and closer together, he gives the signal; the boats come up, and the "seine" net is cast, or, in the technical phrase "shot," overboard.

The grand object is now to enclose the entire shoal. The leads sink one end of the net perpendicularly to the ground; the corks buoy up the other to the surface of the water. When it has been taken all round the fish, the two extremities are made fast, and the shoal is then imprisoned within an oblong barrier of network surrounding it on all sides. The great art is to let as few of the pilchards escape as possible, while this process is being completed. Whenever the "huer" observes from above that they are startled, and are separating at any particular point, to that point he waves his bush, thither the boats are steered, and there the net is "shot" at once. In whatever direction the fish attempt to get out to sea again, they are thus immediately met and thwarted with extraordinary readiness and skill. This labour completed, the silence of intense expectation that has hitherto prevailed among the spectators on the cliff, is broken. There is a great shout of joy on all sides--the shoal is secured!

The "seine" is now regarded as a great reservoir of fish. It may remain in the water a week or more. To secure it against being moved from its position in case a gale should come on, it is warped by two or three ropes to points of land in the cliff, and is, at the same time, contracted in circuit, by its opposite ends being brought together, and fastened tight over a length of several feet. While these operations are in course of performance, another boat, another set of men, and another net (different in form from the "seine") are approaching the scene of action.

This new net is called the "tuck;" it is smaller than the "seine," inside which it is now to be let down for the purpose of bringing the fish closely collected to the surface. The men who manage this net are termed "regular seiners." They receive ten shillings a week, and the same perquisite as the "shooters." Their boat is first of all rowed inside the seine-net, and laid close to the seine-boat, which remains stationary outside, and to the bows of which one rope at one end of the "tuck-net" is fastened. The "tuck" boat then slowly makes the inner circuit of the "seine," the smaller net being dropped overboard as she goes, and attached at intervals to the larger. To prevent the fish from getting between the two nets during this operation, they are frightened into the middle of the enclosure by beating the water, at proper places, with oars, and heavy stones fastened to ropes. When the "tuck" net has at length travelled round the whole circle of the "seine," and is securely fastened to the "seine" boat, at the end as it was at the beginning, everything is ready for the great event of the day, the hauling of the fish to the surface.

Now, the scene on shore and sea rises to a prodigious pitch of excitement. The merchants, to whom the boats and nets belong, and by whom the men are employed, join the "huer" on the cliff; all their friends follow them; boys shout, dogs bark madly; every little boat in the place puts off, crammed with idle spectators; old men and women hobble down to the beach to wait for the news. The noise, the bustle, and the agitation, increase every moment. Soon the shrill cheering of the boys is joined by the deep voices of the "seiners." There they stand, six or eight stalwart sunburnt fellows, ranged in a row in the "seine" boat, hauling with all their might at the "tuck" net, and roaring the regular nautical "Yo-heave-ho!" in chorus! Higher and higher rises the net, louder and louder shout the boys and the idlers. The merchant forgets his dignity, and joins them; the "huer," so calm and collected hitherto, loses his self-possession and waves his cap triumphantly; even you and I, reader, uninitiated spectators though we are, catch the infection, and cheer away with the rest, as if our bread depended on the event of the next few minutes. "Hooray! hooray! Yo-hoy, hoy, hoy! Pull away, boys! Up she comes! Here they are! Here they are!" The water boils and eddies; the "tuck" net rises to the surface, and one teeming, convulsed mass of shining, glancing, silvery scales; one compact crowd of tens of thousands of fish, each one of which is madly endeavouring to escape, appears in an instant!

The noise before was as nothing compared with the noise now. Boats as large as barges are pulled up in hot haste all round the net; baskets are produced by dozens: the fish are dipped up in them, and shot out, like coals out of a sack, into the boats. Ere long, the men are up to their ankles in pilchards; they jump upon the rowing benches and work on, until the boats are filled with fish as full as they can hold, and the gunwales are within two or three inches of the water. Even yet, the shoal is not exhausted; the "tuck" net must be let down again and left ready for a fresh haul, while the boats are slowly propelled to the shore, where we must join them without delay.

As soon as the fish are brought to land, one set of men, bearing capacious wooden shovels, jump in among them; and another set bring large hand-barrows close to the side of the boat, into which the pilchards are thrown with amazing rapidity. This operation proceeds without ceasing for a moment. As soon as one barrow is ready to be carried to the salting-house, another is waiting to be filled. When this labour is performed by night, which is often the case, the scene becomes doubly picturesque. The men with the shovels, standing up to their knees in pilchards, working energetically; the crowd stretching down from the salting-house, across the beach, and hemming in the boat all round; the uninterrupted succession of men hurrying backwards and forwards with their barrows, through a

narrow way kept clear for them in the throng; the glare of the lanterns giving light to the workmen, and throwing red flashes on the fish as they fly incessantly from the shovels over the side of the boat--all combine together to produce such a series of striking contrasts, such a moving picture of bustle and animation, as not even the most careless of spectators could ever forget.

Having watched the progress of affairs on the shore, we next proceed to the salting-house, a quadrangular structure of granite, well-roofed in all round the sides, but open to the sky in the middle. Here, we must prepare ourselves to be bewildered by incessant confusion and noise; for here are assembled all the women and girls in the district, piling up the pilchards on layers of salt, at three-pence an hour; to which remuneration, a glass of brandy and a piece of bread and cheese are hospitably added at every sixth hour, by way of refreshment. It is a service of some little hazard to enter this place at all. There are men rushing out with empty barrows, and men rushing in with full barrows, in almost perpetual succession. However, while we are waiting for an opportunity to slip through the doorway, we may amuse ourselves by watching a very curious ceremony which is constantly in course of performance outside it.

As the filled barrows are going into the salting-house, we observe a little urchin running by the side of them, and hitting their edges with a long cane, in a constant succession of smart strokes, until they are fairly carried through the gate, when he quickly returns to perform the same office for the next series that arrive. The object of this apparently unaccountable proceeding is soon practically illustrated by a group of children, hovering about the entrance of the salting-house, who every now and then dash resolutely up to the barrows, and endeavour to seize on as many fish as they can take away at one snatch. It is understood to be their privilege to keep as many pilchards as they can get in this way by their dexterity, in spite of a liberal allowance of strokes aimed at their hands; and their adroitness richly deserves its reward. Vainly does the boy officially entrusted with the administration of the cane, strike the sides of the barrow with malignant smartness and perseverance--fish are snatched away with lightning rapidity and pickpocket neatness of hand. The hardest rap over the knuckles fails to daunt the sturdy little assailants. Howling with pain, they dash up to the next barrow that passes them, with unimpaired resolution; and often collect their ten or a dozen fish a piece, in an hour or two. No description can do justice to the "Jack-in-Office" importance of the boy with the cane, as he flourishes it about ferociously in the full enjoyment of his vested right to castigate his companions as often as he can. As an instance of the early development of the tyrannic tendencies of human nature, it is, in a

philosophical point of view, quite unique.

But now, while we have a chance, while the doorway is accidentally clear for a few moments, let us enter the salting-house, and approach the noisiest and most amusing of all the scenes which the pilchard fishery presents. First of all we pass a great heap of fish lying in one recess inside the door, and an equally great heap of coarse, brownish salt lying in another. Then we advance farther, get out of the way of everybody, behind a pillar, and see a whole congregation of the fair sex screaming, talking, and--to their honour be it spoken--working at the same time, round a compact mass of pilchards which their nimble hands have already built up to a height of three feet, a breadth of more than four, and a length of twenty. Here we have every variety of the "fairer half of creation" displayed before us, ranged round an odoriferous heap of salted fish. Here we see cronos of sixty and girls of sixteen; the ugly and the lean, the comely and the plump; the sour-tempered and the sweet--all squabbling, singing, jesting, lamenting, and shrieking at the very top of their very shrill voices for "more fish," and "more salt;" both of which are brought from the stores, in small buckets, by a long train of children running backwards and forwards with unceasing activity and in bewildering confusion. But, universal as the uproar is, the work never flags; the hands move as fast as the tongues; there may be no silence and no discipline, but there is also no idleness and no delay. Never was three-pence an hour more jocosely or more fairly earned than it is here!

The labour is thus performed. After the stone floor has been swept clean, a thin layer of salt is spread on it, and covered with pilchards laid partly edgewise, and close together. Then another layer of salt, smoothed fine with the palm of the hand, is laid over the pilchards; and then more pilchards are placed upon that; and so on until the heap rises to four feet or more. Nothing can exceed the ease, quickness, and regularity with which this is done. Each woman works on her own small area, without reference to her neighbour; a bucketful of salt and a bucketful of fish being shot out in two little piles under her hands, for her own especial use. All proceed in their labour, however, with such equal diligence and equal skill, that no irregularities appear in the various layers when they are finished--they run as straight and smooth from one end to the other, as if they were constructed by machinery. The heap, when completed, looks like a long, solid, neatly-made mass of dirty salt; nothing being now seen of the pilchards but the extreme tips of their noses or tails, just peeping out in rows, up the sides of the pile.

Having now inspected the progress of the pilchard fishery, from the catching to the curing, we have seen all that we can personally observe of its different

processes, at one opportunity. What more remains to be done, will not be completed until after an interval of several weeks. We must be content to hear about this from information given to us by others. Yonder, sitting against the outside wall of the salting-house, is an intelligent old man, too infirm now to do more than take care of the baby that he holds in his arms, while the baby's mother is earning her three-pence an hour inside. To this ancient we will address all our inquiries; and he is well qualified to answer us, for the poor old fellow has worked away all the pith and marrow of his life in the pilchard fishery.

The fish--as we learn from our old friend, who is mightily pleased to be asked for information--will remain in salt, or, as the technical expression is, "in bulk," for five or six weeks. During this period, a quantity of oil, salt, and water drips from them into wells cut in the centre of the stone floor on which they are placed. After the oil has been collected and clarified, it will sell for enough to pay off the whole expense of the wages, food, and drink given to the "seiners"--perhaps defraying other incidental charges besides. The salt and water left behind, and offal of all sorts found with it, furnish a valuable manure. Nothing in the pilchard itself, or in connexion with the pilchard, runs to waste--the precious little fish is a treasure in every part of him.

After the pilchards have been taken out of "bulk," they are washed clean in salt water, and packed in hogsheads, which are then sent for exportation to some large sea-port--Penzance for instance--in coast traders. The fish reserved for use in Cornwall, are generally cured by those who purchase them. The export trade is confined to the shores of the Mediterranean--Italy and Spain providing the two great foreign markets for pilchards. The home consumption, as regards Great Britain, is nothing, or next to nothing. Some variation takes place in the prices realized by the foreign trade--their average, wholesale, is stated to be about fifty shillings per hogshead.

As an investment for money, on a small scale, the pilchard fishery offers the first great advantage of security. The only outlay necessary, is that for providing boats and nets, and for building salting-houses--an outlay which, it is calculated, may be covered by a thousand pounds. The profits resulting from the speculation are immediate and large. Transactions are managed on the ready money principle, and the markets of Italy and Spain (where pilchards are considered a great delicacy) are always open to any supply. The fluctuation between a good season's fishing and a bad season's fishing is rarely, if ever, seriously great. Accidents happen but seldom; the casualty most dreaded, being the enclosure of a large fish along with a shoal of pilchards. A "ling," for instance, if unfortunately imprisoned in the seine,

often bursts through its thin meshes, after luxuriously gorging himself with prey, and is of course at once followed out of the breach by all the pilchards. Then, not only is the shoal lost, but the net is seriously damaged, and must be tediously and expensively repaired. Such an accident as this, however, very seldom happens; and when it does, the loss occasioned falls on those best able to bear it, the merchant speculators. The work and wages of the fishermen go on as usual.

Some idea of the almost incalculable multitude of pilchards caught on the shores of Cornwall, may be formed from the following data. At the small fishing cove of Trereen, 600 hogsheads were taken in little more than one week, during August, 1850. Allowing 2,400 fish only to each hogshead--3,000 would be the highest calculation--we have a result of 1,440,000 pilchards, caught by the inhabitants of one little village alone, on the Cornish coast, at the commencement of the season's fishing.

At considerable sea-port towns, where there is an unusually large supply of men, boats, and nets, such figures as those quoted above, are far below the mark. At St. Ives, for example, 1,000 hogsheads were taken in the first three seine nets cast into the water. The number of hogsheads exported annually, averages 22,000. In 1850, 27,000 were secured for the foreign markets. Incredible as these numbers may appear to some readers, they may nevertheless be relied on; for they are derived from trustworthy sources--partly from local returns furnished to me; partly from the very men who filled the baskets from the boat-side, and who afterwards verified their calculations by frequent visits to the salting-houses.

Such is the pilchard fishery of Cornwall--a small unit, indeed, in the vast aggregate of England's internal sources of wealth: but yet neither unimportant nor uninteresting, if it be regarded as giving active employment to a hardy and honest race who would starve without it; as impartially extending the advantages of commerce to one of the remotest corners of our island; and, more than all, as displaying a wise and beautiful provision of Nature, by which the rich tribute of the great deep is most generously lavished on the land most in need of a compensation for its own sterility.