<Saturday Review, 25 October 1873, 534-5>

<SEINE-FISHING.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

<etext downloaded from Project Gutenberg with thanks>

Few braver or hardier men are to be found in England than the Cornish

fishermen. Their business, at all times hazardous, is doubly so on a

coast so dangerous as theirs, where the charm of scenery is bought at

the expense of security. Isolated rocks which are set up like teeth

close round the jagged cliffs and far out from shore, cropping up at

intervals anywhere between Penzance and Scilly; sunken rocks which are

more perilous because more treacherous; strong currents which on the

calmest day keep the sea where they flow in perpetual turmoil; a

singularly tumultuous and changeable sea, where the ground-swell of

the Atlantic sweeps on in long waves which break into a surf that

would swamp any boat put out, even when there is not a breath of

surface-wind stirring; for the most part a very narrow channel to the

coves, a mere water-path as one may call it, beset by rocks which

would break the boats to splinters if they were thrown against

them--all these circumstances make the trade of the Cornish fishermen

exceptionally dangerous; but they also make the men themselves

exceptionally resolute and daring. They are true fighters with nature

for food; and, like the miners, they feel when they set out to their

work that they may never come back from it alive.

No man can predict what the sea will be an hour or two hence. Its

character changes with each fluctuation of the tide; and a calm and

halcyon lake may have become fierce and angry and tempest-tossed when

the ebb turns and the flow sets in. There are times too, when a boat

caught by the wind and drifted into a current would be as helpless as

a cork in a mill-race; and when a whole fleet of fishing-boats might

be blown out to sea, with perhaps half their number capsized. But, as

a rule, having learnt caution with their hardihood from the very

magnitude of the dangers which surround them, these Cornish men suffer

as little by shipwreck as do the fishermen of safer bays; and though

each cove has its own sad story, and every rock its victim, the worst

cases of wreck have been those of larger vessels which have mistaken

lights, or steered too close in shore, or been lost in the fogs that

are so frequent about the Land's End. Or they may have been caught by

the wind and the tide and driven dead on to a lee shore; as so often

happens in the bay between Hartland and Padstow Points.

But the more cautious the men are the less money they make; and though

life is certainly more than meat, life without meat at all, or with

only an insufficient quantity, is rather a miserable affair. The

material well-being of the poor fellows who live in those picturesque

little coves which are the delight and the despair of artists is not

in a very satisfactory condition. By the law of aggregation,

unification, whatever we like to call it--the law of the present day

by which individuals are absorbed into bodies that work for wages for

one master, instead of each man working for himself for his own

hand--the independent fishermen are daily becoming fewer. Save at

Whitesand Bay, where there is a 'poor man's seine' and 'a rich man's

seine,' almost all the seine nets belong now to companies or

partnerships of rich men; and in very few have the men themselves any

share.

Fishermen's seines are not well regarded by the wealthy leaseholders

of the cove and foreshore; and the leaseholder has very large legal

rights and powers which it would be idle to blame him for exercising.

The cots are his, and the capstan is his, and the right of landing is

his; thus he can put on the screw when he wants to have things his own

way, and can threaten evictions, and the withdrawal of the right to

the capstan and to the landing-place, if the men will not go on his

seine, but choose either a united one of their own or independent

drift or trawl nets. Some, it is said, even object to the men fishing

at all, at any rate during the seine season; some have raised the

annual rent per boat for cove rights to three or four times its old

rate; and some go through a round of surly suspicion and irritating

supervision during the 'bulking' days, and higgle jealously over the

small share allowed to the hands in the catch. So that, on the whole,

the Cornish fisherman of the smaller coves has not much to boast of

beside his courage and good heart, and a sturdy independence and

honesty specially noticeable.

We know of no more animated scene than seine-fishing. From the first

act to the last there is a quaint old-world flavour about it

inexpressibly charming to people used to the prosaic life of modern

cities. The 'huers' who stand on the hills watching for the first

appearance of the 'school,' and who make known what they see either by

signals or calling through a huge metal trumpet, the sound of which no

one who has once heard it can ever forget; the smartness of the men

dressing the seine-boats which carry the huge net with all its

appurtenances; their quiet but eager watching for the school to come

within practicable distance--that is, into sufficiently shoal water,

and where the bottom is fairly level (else the fish all escape from

under the net); the casting or shooting of the seine enclosing the

school, and then the 'tucking' or lifting the fish from the sea to the

boats--every stage is full of interest; but this last is the prettiest

of all.

Imagine a moonlight night--low water at midnight--when the tucking

begins. The boat cannot come up to the ordinary landing, which is only

a roughly-paved causeway dipping by a gradual descent into the sea; so

those who would share in the sport are fain to take the fisherman's

path along the cliff and drop into the boat off the rocks. These rocks

are never very safe. Even the men themselves, trained to them as they

are from boyhood, sometimes slip on their slanting, broken,

seaweed-covered surfaces, when, if they cannot swim and are not

helped, all is over for them in this life; and for strangers they are

difficult at the best of times. But on an obscurely lighted night, and

after heavy rain, they are doubly risky. The incoming wave lifts the

boat a few inches higher and nearer; and you must catch the exact

moment and make a spring before she drifts off again with the ebb. The

row across the little bay is beautiful. The grey cliffs look solemn

and majestic in the pale light of the moon; the shadows are deep and

unfathomable; everywhere you see black rocks standing out from the

steely sea, and little lines of breakers mark the place of the sunken

rocks. In the distance shine the magnificent Lizard Lights, and the

red and white revolving light of the terrible Wolf Rock flashes on the

horizon; the moon touches the sea with silver, and the waves as they

rise and fall seem like molten metal in the heavy sluggish rhythm of

their flow. Only round the foot of the cliffs and about the rocks they

break into spray that serves as high lights against the sombre grey

and black of the landscape. You pull across to the opposite point, and

then round into another smaller bay where the cliffs rise sheer, and

the seine net is cast. You come into a little fleet of fishing-boats

set round on the outside of a circle of corks, within which is the

master-boat, where all hands are assembled pulling at the net, to draw

it closer. It is a stirring sight. Some dozen or more stalwart fellows

are hauling on the lines with the sailors' cheery cry and the sailors'

exuberant goodwill. Every now and then the master's voice cries out

'Break! break my sons!' when they shorten hold and go over to the

other side of the boat, pulling themselves gradually aslant again,

till the same order of 'Break! break!' shows that their purchase is

too slack. At last the net is hauled up close enough, and then the fun

begins.

All the boats engaged form a close circle round the inner line of

corks, which is now a little sea of silver where the imprisoned

pilchards beat and flutter, producing a sound for which we have no

satisfactory onomatopoetic word. In moonlight this little sea is

silver; in torchlight it is of fire with varied colours flashing

through the redder gleams; and in the dark it is a sea of

phosphorescent light, each mesh of the net, each fish, each seaweed

illuminated as if traced in flame. Every one is now busy. The men dip

in baskets, or maunds, expressly made for this purpose, and ladle out

the quivering fish by hundreds into the boats. In a few moments they

are standing leg-deep in pilchards. Every one on the spot is pressed

into the service, and even a boat manned by nothing more stalwart than

one or two half-sick and half-frightened women receives its orders;

and 'Hold on ladies! all hands hold on to the boat,' serves to keep

one of the busiest of the tucking-boats in equilibrium.

The men, for all their hearty work, are like a party of schoolboys at

play. Their humour may be rough, but it is never meant to be rude;

their goodwill is sincere, for they have a share, however small, in

the success of the catch; and the more they tuck, the more they will

have for their wives and families to live on through the winter. It is

their harvest-time; and they are as jocund as harvesters proverbially

are. There is no stint of volunteer labour either. Men who have been

working hard all day on their own account go out at midnight to lend a

hand to their mates at the seine. Even though the take is for a

hard-fisted master who would count fins if he could, and who would

refuse his men a head apiece if he thought his orders would be carried

out, they are all honestly glad. They remember the time when a rich

school was the wealth of the whole cove, and when a string of fresh

pilchards would be given freely to any one coming to the cove at the

time of bulking, or, as we should call it, storing.

Still, whatever of economic value there may be in this exploitation of

labour, it has its mournful side in the loss of individual value which

it includes. And no one can help feeling this who listens to the talk

of the elder fishermen, sorrowfully comparing the old days of personal

independence and generous lordship with the present ones of wages and

a wide-awake lesseeship, conscious of its legal rights and determined

to act on them.

When all the fish have been tucked there is nothing for it but to row

home again in the freshening morning air. The tide is rising now, and

the moon is waning. The rocks look blacker, the grey moss-grown cliffs

more solemn, more mysterious, the white surf breaking about them is

higher and sharper than when you set out; and the boom of the sea

thundering through cave and channel has a sound in it that makes you

feel as if land and your own bed would be preferable to an open boat

at the mercy of the Atlantic surges. The tide has so far risen that

you can land nearer to the paved causeway than before; but even now

you have to wait for the flow of the wave, then make a spring on to

the black and slimy rocks, which would be creditable to trained

gymnastic powers. So you go home, under the first streaks of dawn, wet

through and scaly, and smelling abominably of fish dashed with a

streak of tar for a richer kind of compound.

The whole place however, will smell of fish to-morrow and for many

to-morrows. When the tucking-boats are brought in, then the women take

their turn, and pack the pilchards in the fish-cellars or

salting-houses. Here they are said to be in 'bulk,' all laid on their

sides with their noses pointing outwards; layers of salt alternating

with layers of fish. Their great market is Italy, where they serve as

favourite Lenten fare. The Italians believe them to be smoked, and

hence call them \_fumados\_. This word the dear thick-headed British

sailor has caught up, according to his wont, and translated into 'fair

maids;' and 'fair maids'--pronounced firmads--is the popular name of

salted pilchards all through Cornwall.

The pilchard fishery begins as early as June or July; but then it is

further out to sea, sometimes twenty miles out. According to the old

saying,

 When the corn is in the shock

 The fish are at the rock;

harvest-time, which means from August to the end of October, being the

main season for pilchard-fishing in shoal-water close at home. There

are some choice bits of picturesque life still left to us in faraway

places where the ordinary tourist has not penetrated; but nothing is

more picturesque than seine-fishing in one of the wilder Cornish

coves, when the tucking goes on at midnight, either by moonlight or

torchlight, or only by the phosphorescent illumination of the sea

itself. No artist that we can remember at this moment has yet painted

it; but it is a subject which would well repay careful study and

loving handling.