

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Line-fishing*

WITH the exception of spears and harpoons, lines are the most ancient method of capturing fish still in use, and the primitive fishermen of the Stone Age would not find any very great difference in the



A GROUP OF FISHERMEN

lines employed to-day from those he was accustomed to many thousands of years ago.

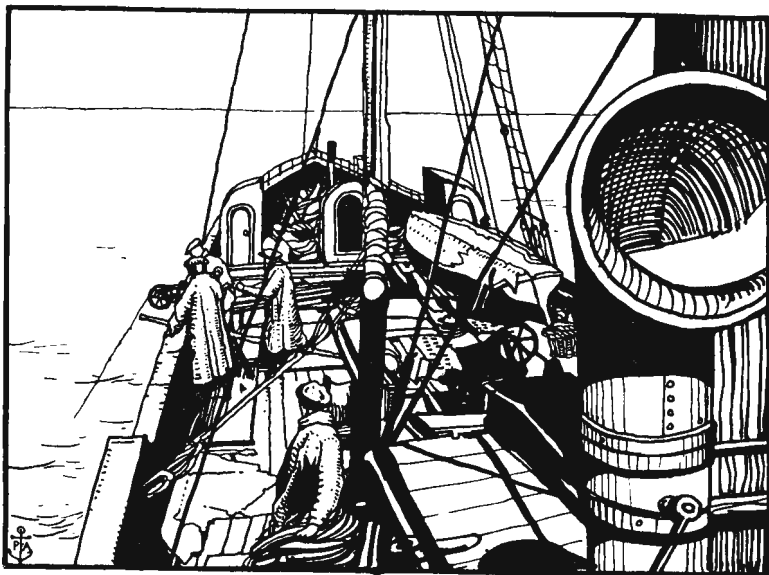
There are two main divisions of line-fishing: *long lines* and *hand-lines*.

No matter whether long lines are used in a small open boat or on a modern steam-liner the method is more or less the same, except that on board the latter vessels a steam hauling-machine relieves the men of much hard work. The general characteristic of long-line fishing is that it consists of a 'long line,' with

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shorter lines, or 'snoods,' attached at intervals, the whole affair being sunk or moored by stones or anchors.

In these days long lines are extensively used in all parts of Northern Europe, 'steam-liners'—vessels of the same type as the latest steam-trawlers—being fitted



HAULING IN LINES ON AN ABERDEEN LINER

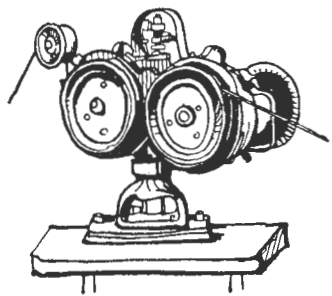
out from Grimsby, Aberdeen, Fleetwood, and Milford Haven for this purpose, and fishing as far off as the Rockall Bank, the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland, where they capture chiefly halibut, ling, and cod. This kind of fishing is termed 'great lining,' and the vessels engaged in it are often away from their home port several weeks.

'Small-line' fishing is carried on by local boats which return to their home port daily. But both 'small'- and 'great'-line fishing are classed as 'long'-line fishing. The characteristic feature of 'hand-lines' is that each

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line is worked by an individual member of the crew and not strung together on snoods, as on 'long lines.'

Forty or fifty years ago Grimsby had a wonderful fleet of 'liners'—"cod-smacks" as they were generally called—but which are now but a memory of the past, their place having been taken by steam- and motor-driven vessels. The old sailing-smack, clipper-built for speed, was fitted with large wells for carrying home her fish alive, for the process of freezing fish had not been invented. She usually carried from nine to eleven hands, including the skipper. Each smack, or liner, has a complete set of about



A MODERN HAND-LINE HAULER

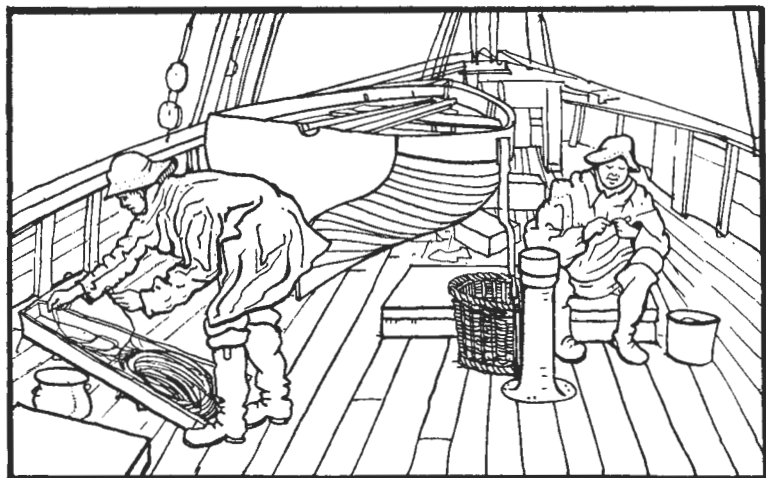
one hundred and eighty to two hundred and forty hemp lines, forty fathoms long, each line with twenty-six cotton snoods, one and a half fathoms apart, this distance preventing the hooks from getting entangled. A 'string' of one hundred and eighty lines, each fastened together, makes a total length of seven thousand two hundred fathoms—*i.e.*, about seven nautical miles. The four thousand six hundred and eighty hooks are baited with whelks.

Long-lining is carried on only during the daytime, the lines being set about dawn and hauled up before nightfall. They are laid across the tide so that the snoods may drift clear of the main line, or 'tacs.'

On board one of the old smacks—obviously the routine of working has been considerably modified on a steam- or motor-vessel, owing to her not having to depend on wind—the smack was put under easy sail, and kept as much as possible with wind free, so as to

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make a straight course while the line was being paid out. The lines are neatly coiled in wooden trays or baskets, so that they can be run out as the vessel moves ahead. Each tray contains from twelve to sixteen pieces. No corks or floats are used to raise the lines off the ground, but they are kept steady every forty



BAITING LINES ON A SMACK

fathoms by a small anchor, and kept in position at every mile by buoys with a 'dan' or pole and flag on top at both ends. When the tide is nearly done the hauling begins. On a smack the sail was lowered, the end buoy put on board, and the vessel put on short tacks along the course of the line, shown by the buoys at every mile, and the line hauled in as the vessel went along. In these days various mechanical devices and steam hauling-machines have greatly simplified this formerly laborious work. The fish is taken off the hooks and thrown on the deck as the lines come up over the side.

In the olden days, before the invention of freezing

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apparatus, the cod used to be kept alive in special wells, built into the hold of the ships. But if the catch was very great some of the fish would be killed and packed in ice.

The great enemy of the line-fishermen is the dog-fish, which often eats the cod while it is attached to the hooks, causing enormous damage and loss. Line-fishermen have always complained that much harm was done to their fishing by the trawlers, which often carry away their gear when it is in the water. This can easily



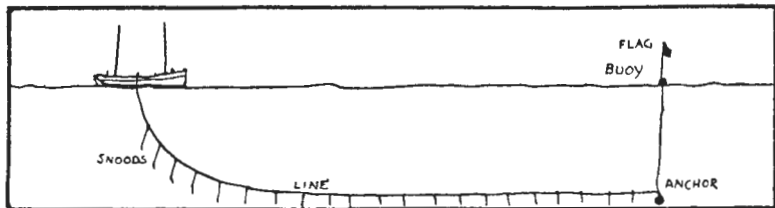
BASKET OF BAITED LINES

happen in the comparatively crowded area of the North Sea, where hundreds of vessels are fishing over the same grounds, although, as a matter of fact, line-fishing is generally carried on over a 'rough' ground, whereas trawlers prefer a smooth, sandy bottom.

I think my first experience of line-fishing must have been on the Lossiemouth boat *Lady Agnes*, in which I made several trips on the Moray Firth about ten years ago. She was an old 'Zulu'-built craft into which a motor had been fitted, and a smelly old vessel she was. But her skipper and crew were as friendly and hospitable as only Morayshire 'loons' can be, and I shall never forget the days and nights spent out in the middle of the Firth during that summer. We left the harbour early in the afternoon, and did not shoot our lines until we were off Helmsdale. In these Scottish boats, chiefly used for taking haddock and cod, each man has a line of some fifty fathoms—*i.e.*, three hundred feet—in length. To each of these lines are attached one

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hundred snoods. Each line is laid out carefully in a 'scull,' or basket, so that they can be run out clear as the boat goes along. When she arrives at the fishing-ground a cork buoy, with a flagstaff about six feet high attached to it, is heaved over the side of the boat. The buoy is kept stationary by means of a heavy stone or anchor, and the line attached to the anchor is then paid out as the boat moves along through the water. If there is no wind and the boat has no auxiliary



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power the crew have to use oars. When the line is paid out the boat goes back to the buoy. The anchor is taken on board, and the men start to haul in the line. Haddock-lines generally consist of from eight hundred to a thousand hooks on snoods of fourteen inches, about two feet apart. Mussels and lug-worms are used as bait. Cod-lines have fewer hooks, seldom more than eighty. Their snoods are five feet long and two and a half feet apart. Small haddock and herring are the ordinary bait used. Skate, halibut, and ling and turbot are also caught with cod-lines.

The sun had set some hours before behind the Paps of Caithness. There was still a dull orange glow in the north-west. A slight breeze sprung up, and heavy masses of cloud drifted along low down in the sky. About forty miles to the south-west lay Ben Nevis, and to the south flashed the lighthouse on Tarbat Ness. To

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the west lay the mountains of Sutherland, Ben Hourn, Ben Dobbrain, and Ben Meillich. Still farther north were the peak of Scaravan and the sugar-loafed Morven, then the low-lying, wind-swept plains of Caithness. All



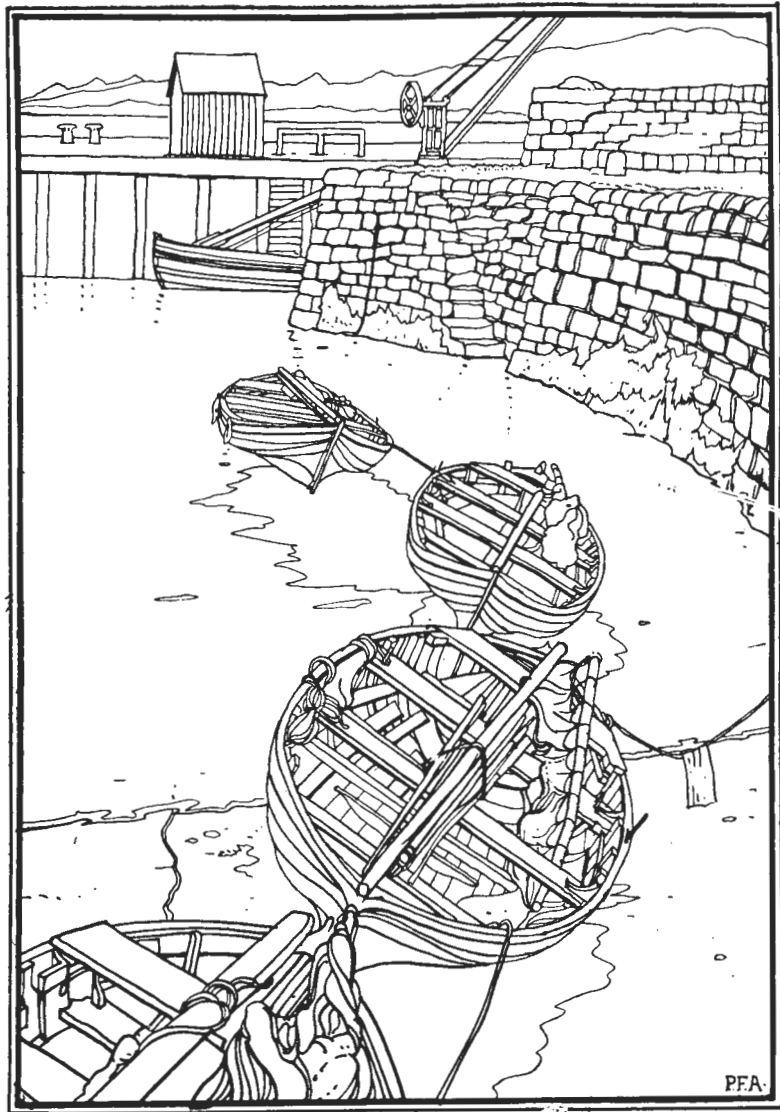
SCOTS LINE-FISHERMEN

the coast was a dull indigo against an orange background, the sea taking on the colours of the sky. All that long evening (there is hardly any real night on the Moray Firth in June) we lay to, and about 3 A.M. hauled in our lines, and arrived back in Lossiemouth two or three hours later.

The actual methods of line-fishing still practised on the east coast of Scotland are those which have been in use from time immemorial. The only real difference has been the introduction of motor-power into the boats. The majority of the east coast fishermen look upon line-fishing as supplementary to herring-fishing, and an auxiliary means of earning a livelihood. I believe the first motor line-boat made her appearance in 1912, and to-day there are very few sailing-craft left in Scotland.

Here is an interesting description of the line-fishermen at Buckie, Banffshire, about eighty years ago : <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Hutcheson, *Days of Yore*, p. 31.



PFA.

OLD TYPE OF LINE-BOATS, MORAY FIRTH



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The fishermen in summer often went barefooted to sea and wore a pair of canvas trousers and a huge 'fear-nought' coat. Their underclothing and caps were of home-spun wool. It was only in the spring, when engaged in the great line-fishing, that they even took a blanket to sea with them. For provisions they had some barley-meal bannocks, a roasted haddock, or a pint or so of kail carried in a flagon, and perhaps they indulged occasionally in the luxury of an onion, all of which were rolled in a cloth and placed in a 'scull' with the bait line. Each man had his berth on board, and it was with the greatest reluctance that he could be persuaded to assist his neighbour. The men in the mid-ships had to bail the boat. One was situated in the faren' and the other on the aftern side, and when on a long tack, if water was coming on board, the man on the leese side had a hard time of it baling all the while all his messmates looked on. When the tack was changed then the man who had been on the weather side had to bale, and his 'spell' at this disagreeable duty would not be a long one if the boat was near the shore. There would be some danger of the boat completely filling before the crew would assist the men whose duty it was to bale.

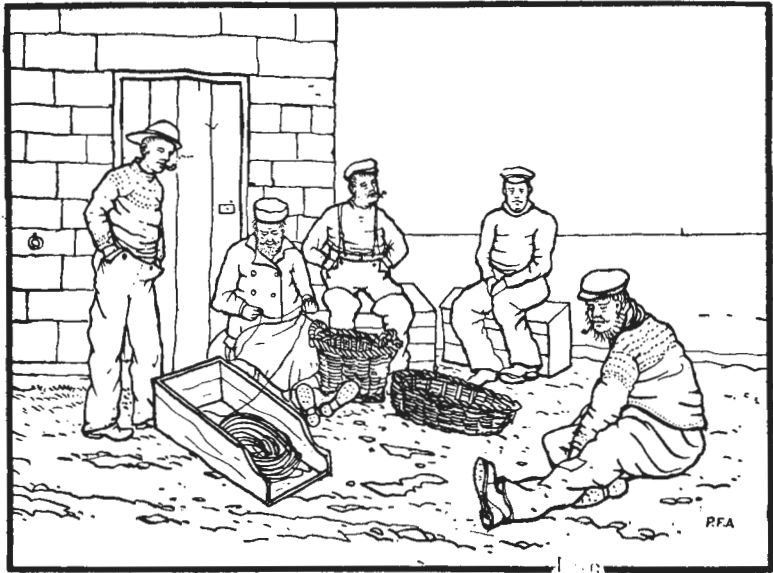
Many of the large boats carried three masts—a foremast, mainmast, mizzen, but no jib. The largest sail was in the centre of the boat, the next largest being the foresail. In stormy weather the mainmast was taken down and run over the stern. It was only very rarely before the foc'stle was introduced into boats that the crews when at the line-fishing stayed at sea all night; but lines being sometimes damaged during the darkness, and the boats becoming more comfortable, reconciled fishermen to remain at sea until the morning to protect their gear. The practice was for the crews to leave for the fishing at such an hour as would enable them to see both sides of the Moray Firth when shooting their lines.

If the wife of a fisherman was unable to help her husband bait his lines, haul up his boat, and launch

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it, owing to domestic occupations, he had to engage a female servant.

In the morning the man who was first at the boat provided himself with a stone, and feeling in the darkness for the head of a nail, he struck the nail with the stone, and the



BAITING LINES FIFTY YEARS AGO

noisy process of summoning the crews was continued until the last of the laggards had arrived ; some of the women meanwhile having been going from door to door to see that all the men and women concerned were awakened. At the launching and taking up of the boat the women stood side by side with their ' masters,' as the fishermen to whom they were engaged were called. When the boat was afloat the women had to hand on board the ballast and lines to the men, and it was not an unusual thing on a cold winter's day for them to be wet to the height of the waist. . . . When the boats had put to sea the women had to gather mussels for bait. When the fishermen arrived back again the women were again on the shore. Sometimes they even carried the

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men and lines ashore. It was not at all uncommon for the fishermen to be so wet (for they had no oilskins in those days) that in the words of an eyewitness it appeared that they had been "dragged in the sea." Before the catch was



COMING HOME FROM LINE-FISHING FIFTY YEARS AGO

divided among the crew—each man getting his share—a certain number were selected as wages for the women. But as the women had little or no time to clean and dispose of the fish they generally took it to an old widow woman who cleaned and sold it, keeping a commission for herself. The rest of the fish were taken from the shore, emptied out on to the middle of the floor of one of the houses, and the work of gutting and cleaning started.

It can be imagined that such a method of disposing of the fish did not greatly help toward the cleanliness, comfort or convenience of a fisherman's house in those days, and some idea of the atmosphere of one of these hovels, for they were little better than that, may be imagined when one hears that the livers of the fish were kept for some weeks in a barrel before being sold to be made into oil! The oil itself was chiefly used for lamps, and a very bad light it gave, according to the account left us by contemporary writers.

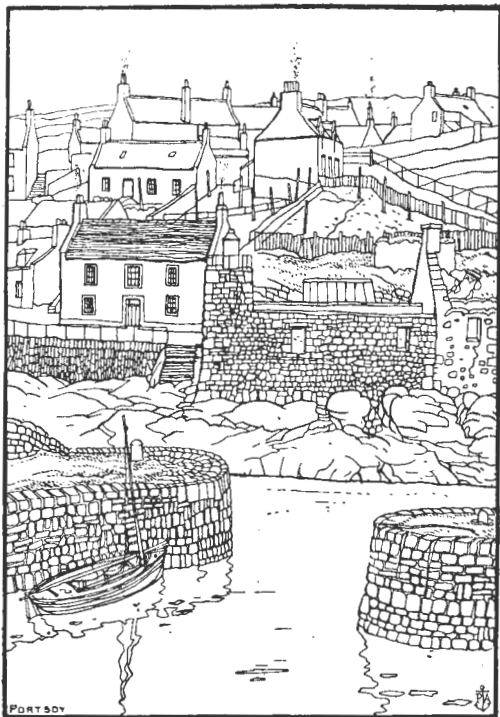
Hand-lines are still in use in smaller ports, mainly for haddock and mackerel. But in many places, especi-

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ally on the Moray Firth coast, the modern Danish seine-net has almost entirely superseded the old hand-lines. With this kind of gear fishing is generally carried on near the coast, not more than thirty miles from the land.

A quarter of a century ago, when hand-lining was much more common than it is to-day, the average line was forty-five feet long, having a lead sinker at the end weighing about seven pounds, with a stout iron wire, called a 'sprawl-wire,' fixed into the top, at right angles to the sinker. It slightly curves down at the ends, and to each of these is fastened a snood, to which a single hook is attached. Sometimes more than one hook was put on each snood when fish were very abundant. The modern hand-line does not greatly differ from those formerly in use all round the coasts of Great Britain.

When the time came to start fishing the boat hove to, and each hand let out his line, keeping it a few inches off the bottom, unless—when fishing for cod—



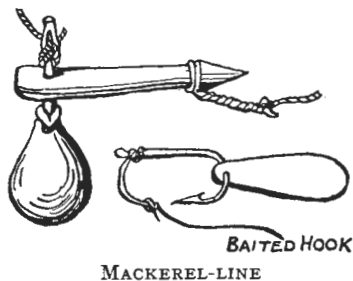
A BANFFSHIRE HARBOUR

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herring were about, when it had to be kept no more than two or three fathoms deep.

But all this life is now changed. There are no line-fishermen left in the Buckie district, except a few old men still earning a scanty income with hand-lines, and the long-line fishery is extinct there. The same applies to the Helmsdale district, on the other side of the Firth.

In the Banff district only motor-boats are now in use, carrying four or five men and a boy. Each man supplies four half-lines, with four hundred and eighty hooks on each half-line. Thus the total



number of hooks shot by each motor-boat is seven thousand six hundred and eighty or nine thousand six hundred. In the Findhorn district, where Lossiemouth is situated, there are very few sailing-boats still left, and these are very small, carrying only two or three men, with an average of two thousand four hundred hooks per boat. The motor-boats have about five thousand hooks each. In the Wick district, on the north of the Moray Firth, hand-line fishing is still carried on from the little villages on the coast of Caithness (so vividly described by Mr Neil Gunn in his delightful books), hand-lines being used simultaneously with 'ripper-fishing,' baiting the hooks of the ripper with mussels or limpets.

So unimportant has line-fishing become in England that the annual reports of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries hardly mention it. In fact, there are now only two hundred and fourteen motor- and sail-vessels engaged in line-fishing, as compared with some

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one thousand five hundred and thirty-four trawlers on the entire coast-line of England and Wales.

Stephen Reynolds gives us a good description of fishing with mackerel-lines at Sidmouth, Devonshire.<sup>1</sup>

Faint light was showing through the north window of the kitchen. "Coom on!" said Tony. "Time we was to sea." He refilled the kettle, hunted out an old pair of trousers, rammed himself into a faded guernsey and picked up three mackerel-lines from the dresser. The fishermen's line is very different from the tackle makers' arrangements. At Sidmouth the upper part consists of two to three fathom of stoutish conger line, to take the friction of the gunwale, and five to six fathoms of finer line, to the end of which a conical 'sugar-loaf' lead is attached by a clove hitch, the short end being laid up around the standing part for an inch or so and then finished off with a strong, neat 'difficue' (corruption of *a difficult* knot?). A swivel, or better still simply an eyelet cut from an old boot, runs free, just above the lead, between the clove hitch and difficue knot. To the eyelet is attached the 'sid'—*i.e.*, two fathoms of fine snooding—to the sid a length of gut on which half an inch of clay pipe stem is threaded, and to the gut a rather large hook. The bait is a 'lask,' or long three-cornered strip of skin, cut from the tail of a mackerel. The older fishermen prefer a round lead, cast in the egg-shell of a gull, because it runs sweeter through the water, but with this form the fish's bite is difficult to feel on account of the jerk having to be transmitted through the heavy bulky piece of lead.

The lines are trailed astern of the boat as it sails up and down, where the mackerel are believed to be. When well on the feed they will bite, even the clay pipe and bare hook, faster than they can be hauled inboard. . . .

He took some salted lasks from the brine-pot, blew out the lamp—and forth we went. After collecting the mast, sails, and oars from where they were lying, strewn haphazard on the beach, we pushed and pulled the *Cock Robin* down to

<sup>1</sup> *A Poor Man's House.*

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the water's edge, and filled up the ballast-bags with our hands, like irritable children playing at shingle pies. "A li'l bit farther down. Look out! Jump in. Get hold the oars," commanded Tony. With a cuss-word or two (the oars had a horrid disposition to jump the thole-pins) we shoved and rowed off, shipping no more than a couple of buckets of water over the stern. Tony scrambled in over the starboard bow, his trousers and boots dripping. "'Tis al'ays like that, putting off from thees yer damned ol' baych. No won'er us get the rheumatics." He hung on to the rudder, loosed the mizzen, I stepped the mast, hoisted the jib and lug, and made fast halyards and sheets. Our undignified bobbing, our impatient wallowing on the water stopped short. The wind's life enters into the craft, she bowed graciously to the waves, with a motion compounded of air and water, wings and a heaving, as if she were airily suspended over the sea, the *Cock Robin* settled to her course. Spray skatted gleefully over her bows and the wavelets made a gurgling music along the clinker-built strakes of her.

Tony put out the lines: tangled two of them, got in a tear, as he calls it, snapped the sid, bit the rusty hook off, spat out a shred of old bait, brought the boat's head too far into the wind, cursed the flapping sail, and cursed the tiller, grubbed in his pockets for a new hook, and made tiny knots with great clumsy fingers and his teeth. "An't never got no gear like I used tu," he complained, and then, standing upright, with the tiller between his legs and a line in each outstretched hand, he unbuttoned his face and broke into the merriest of smiles. "What du 'ee think o' Tony then, getting in a tear fust start out? Do 'ee think he's maazed—or obsolete? But we'll catch 'em if they'm yer. Yer ought to go 'long wi' Uncle Jake. He'd tell 'ee summit—and the fish tu if they wasn't biting proper!" By the time the lines were out the dun sou'westerly clouds all around had raised themselves like a vast downhanging fringe, a tremendous curtain, ragged with inconceivable delicacy at the foot, between which and the water-line the peep of day stared blankly. . . .

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“ Look to your lee’ard line ! ” he cried. “ They’ m up for it ! ”

He hauled a mackerel aboard, and, catching hold of the shank of the hook, flicked the fish into the bottom of the boat with one and the same motion that flung the sid over-board again ; and after it the lead. Wedging the mackerel’s head between his knees, he bent its body to a curve, scraped off the scales near its tail, and cut a fresh lask from the living fish. He is tender-hearted by nature, but now : “ That’ ll hae ’em ! ” he crowed.

The mackerel bit hotly at our new bait.<sup>1</sup>

Before the lines were properly out, in they had to come again, flop-flop went the fish on the bottom boards as we jerked them carelessly off the hooks. Every moment or two one of them would dance up and flip its tail wildly ; beat on the bottom boards a tattoo which spattered us with scales ; then sink back among the glistening mass that was fast losing its beauty of colour, its opalescent pinks and steely blues, even as it died and stiffened.

Suddenly the fish stopped biting, perhaps because the rising sun was shining down into the water. The wind dropped without warning, as southerly winds will do in the early morning if they don’t come on to blow a good deal later. The *Cock Robin* wallowed again on the water. “ We’ m done,” said Tony. “ Let’ s get in out o’ it in time for the early market. There ain’ t no other boats out. Thees yer ought to fetch ’leven-pence the dizzen. We’ ve made thees day gude in case nort else don’ t turn up.”

While I rowed ashore, he struck sail, and threw the ballast



A DEVON FISHER-  
MAN WITH A  
HAND-LINE

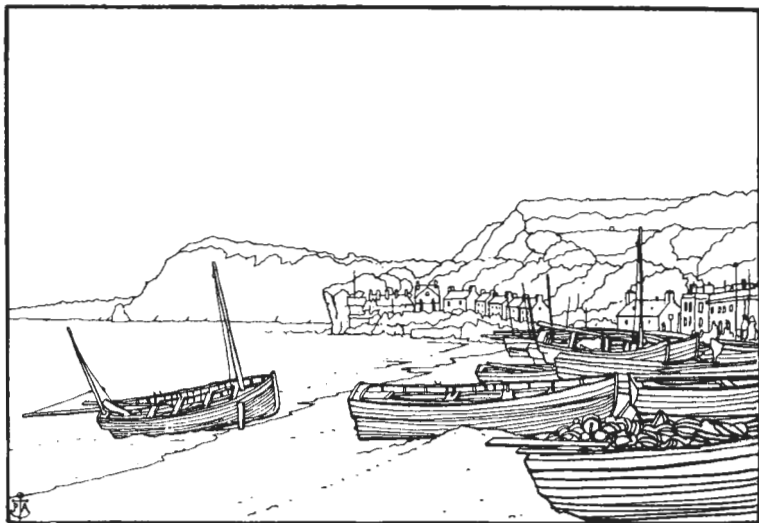
<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, if the mackerel are only half on the feed a fresh lask is better than any other bait, better than an equally brilliant salted lask. It is the shine of the bait at which the fish bite, as at a spinner, but probably the fresh lask leaves behind it in the water the odour or flavour of mackerel oil which keeps the shoal together and makes them follow the boat.



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overboard. Most pleasantly does the shingle ballast plop-rattle into the water when there is a catch of fish aboard. We ran in high upon a sea. Willing hands hauled the *Cock Robin* up the beach: we had fish to give away for help!

The fishing-craft still in use on this part of the Devonshire coast that Stephen Reynolds described so



LINE-BOATS AT SIDMOUTH

lovingly in his various books are no more than twenty-five feet in length, for they have to be drawn up on an open beach. To avoid their heeling over and filling in the surf they must be built shallow, with next to no keel. Consequently they can have but small hold on the water, and do not sail close to the wind, and beating home is always a long, wearisome job. They carry only a mizzen and a dipping-lug, the latter large and unhandy, for the sail has to be lowered or dipped every time the boat tacks. There is neither comfort nor safety. The only shelter provided is by a tiny cuddy in

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the bows in which one can sleep if one's feet are outside, or *vice versa* !

There are many other kinds of hand-lines used which depend on the species of fish to be caught, as well as on the methods employed—*i.e.*, 'ground' or 'drift-line' fishing, when the boat is at anchor, 'railing' or 'whiffing,' when the boat is in motion, and cod-lines. But as those are now found only in small villages and have no commercial importance I will not describe them in detail.

