

## CHAPTER VI.

## SEA LIFE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

It is then that the traveller, in a visit to the East of Fife, sees the tall houses, the malt kilns and stores on the Braehead of Cellardyke, with the hundred wine cellars and gin magazines elsewhere, fast sinking into roofless and dingy ruins. The square-rigged ships thronging the harbours, till they looked like a forest, with topgallant and royal mast; the sledge trains rumbling along the causeways, till they appeared almost alive with bag and barrel, had all disappeared as the sunshine of yesterday in the shadow of the Union, or the odious taxes which had followed. Neither dynasty nor Government, however, could rob the coast of heaven's own gift in the fisheries, which, amid all changes, continued on the whole to prosper. It is a suggestive fact that the patriarch, James Nairn, who died in 1771, added £55 to his stipend from the herring teinds of East Anstruther; but here is the testimony of an eye witness concerning the coast of 1778, or one hundred years ago. It is the public-spirited inspector of the fisheries, David Loch, who says of Cellardyke—"A good fishing is carried on here. The people are very industrious." He had a Fife side tour on the first Saturday of August, and continues—"There are at present in Crail eleven boats on the herring fishing, about fifteen at Cellardyke, four at Pittenweem, and nearly the same number of small yawls on the white fishing. On Monday, the 7th, I visited the fishers and all concerned in the fishing trade, who were in high spirits on account of their success, very considerable quantities of herrings having been taken. Thirteen boats are employed

on the herring fishing at St Monance, and about the same number of small boats ply the white fishing on this coast. The people here being very industrious, are all become wealthy by their trade and fishing." Mr Loch is very interested about the great herring kilns on the south side, and goes on—"It is to be observed that none of the inhabitants on the coast of Fife from Fifeness to St Monance have yet begun to redden herrings." They, however, understood, and were about to begin the romantic process according to this patriot, who adds, "No less a sum than two thousand pounds sterling has been received by the above fishers for herrings sold to the country people for their own use, and to others for salting as white herrings, who sent them up the Firth to supply those who inhabit the populous banks of the Forth, so that this lucrative trade on the two sides of the Firth has brought into this spot of our country within a few weeks eight thousand five hundred pounds sterling of a clear gain all by labour."

In conclusion Mr Loch deals with the great fisher grievance of that day. It is in reference to the Admiral's Court, which we saw in the teind case was held in Anstruther, though it also frequently sat in Cellardyke and the sister towns; but to take his own words—"The Honourable James Wemyss of Wemyss, deputy-admiral of the fishing over all the coast of Fife, has, I think, very improperly fixed his substitute at Dysart, at which place all the Courts on the fishing affairs on the East Coast of Fife are holden and litigations or disputes determined. Dysart being full twenty miles from the fishing towns on the coast, where herrings commonly, I had almost said always, set in, the poor fishermen are obliged to trudge that distance to attend the Court, or suffer decret to pass against them in absence." This was the fate of the St Monance fishermen, of whom no less than six boats' crews must have remained

idle for two days in the harvest of fishing to go twenty miles to attend Mr Wemyss' Court.

And so for the next eleven or twelve years life on the coast continued—that is, with a certain fulness in basket and store ; but a calamity is at hand, which, as we shall see, is to bring hunger and hardship to every home. It is the great haddock famine—the seven years' dearth of the old fisher—which was perhaps the more overwhelming, because, like the midnight storm, all eyes were closed, till ruin and misery were written around them. A curious story, it is true, had come up from the Buchan coast. It was about a terrible sea monster, having, as the tale ran, a head big as a drave boat, covered with bristles, grey in colour, but long and shaggy as the tangles on the skerry ; that with the size of the whale it had the swiftness and ferocity of the shark ; at least so it seemed to the poor northern crew, who saw a single toss of that dreadful tale brush away their fishing tackle with as little effort as the strong wing cleaves the gossamer ; but the disasters did not end with the day, for ever since the haddock, as if sharing the terror of man, had fled from the invaded seas. “ It was only the brig capsized in the gale,” growled the old boatswain ; “ it was all smuggled gin,” snivelled the spiteful cobbler ; “ it must be the kracken,” said the novel reading fisher lass, Annie Watson, the mother of the one day Professor Tennant ; but the old fishers only laughed, though they confessed they were no wiser than their neighbours to tell the secret of the hungry sea. Still it was the echo in the distance, now rising now falling on the gale, and perchance but little heeded till that memorable day, in the early summer of 1790, when the anxious cry rings on the shore, as boat after boat lands at the bulwark and not a single haddock, or without “ drawin' bluid,” to borrow the sea phrase of the time. Next day, and next, and next the

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lines were cast on opposite tacks, but the home coming was the same, and now the harvest gone trials and troubles soon found an open door. Nothing, however, is so eloquent as the voice of an eye-witness, and here it is from the first statistical account of the Scottish parishes. Going back to the narrow tall-gabled manse, as it abuts on the churchyard wall at Kilrenny, we find the old minister broken with grief for the loss of his cherished partner, "the rare instance of conjugal fidelity," of her tombstone; but he lifts his head over the kindly memories of the past, already before the reader. These, indeed, are all sunshine compared with the gloomy present; the fishery, whether by net or line, a forlorn failure, the haddock especially being to-day a rare stranger, as it had been for the last two years. The little world around him is changed, but it is all for the worse. In 1755 the population of the parish was 1348, but now he ascertains it to be only 1086, owing in part to the growing size of the farms, but far more to the famine of the sea. To-day, he continues, there are but two breweries in Cellardyke, though he could remember the time when there were four-and-twenty; nor is this all, for to increase the public perplexity, provisions are at a ransom price, for he tells us, as things not to be forgotten, of a hen at a shilling, beef at fourpence, and fresh butter at eightpence a pound. We are also indebted to the old Presbyter, William Beat, for the origin of Cellardyke, not, as some say, because the old fishers had their houses at the Kirkton, and their tackle stores or cellars at the beach, but in consequence, he tells us, of the great salt and barrel stores of the herring trade and traders of ancient Skimfie.

Pittenweem shore, however, was still more dreary, for, according to Dr Nairn, while there were seventy-two sailors there were only twelve fishers who manned the five small yawls that swing

in the ebb at the west harbour. He mentions, but merely so, the well-known smacks, which at this time touched on the coast in order to run the turbot or "bannock fluke" alive to Billingsgate, an experiment which did not prosper, though for years an English company had two or three well built, well manned cutters afloat in the lobster trade, which yearly, it is said, put over a thousand pounds into the pockets of the East of Fife fishermen.

St Monance, we learn from old Archibald Gillis, sent sixteen drave boats, some with six, and others with as many as nine of a crew; but the fishing was only followed from year's end to year's end by the eighty men, or twenty crews, who plied hook and line in a class of small but trusty yawls, which danced like sea ducks in all weather. The notice refers to 1795, or the "black year," as it is called, when the oatmeal rose to the unprecedented price for the time of 15d the peck. So great, indeed, was the distress, especially amongst the seafaring families, that the Kirk-Session arranged with the "friend of the poor," Sir Robert Anstruther, for the bolls of Balcaskie, by which the "parritch pat" was stirred at 3d the peck under the market price. Crail, however, furnishes the most interesting details. They are by the exact but kindly Andrew Bell, who gives the fishing industry in 1791 at thirteen drave boats, six great line boats, and six smaller ones employed in the lobster fishing. He also gives the number of fishermen at 42 or 44; but though the supplies of cod and ling were still abundant, the haddock had become such a rarity that 4d or 6d was paid for a single fish, when but a few years before they were any day bought at the pier for five halfpence the dozen. The herring fishing, he further says, was on the decline, and the reasons he gives are at least as plausible as many of the conjectures of the present day. He hints, it is true, at

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the over fishing theory, the "industry of man ruining the shoals," as he says ; but the great enemy, in his eye, was the Dutch, who, with their big 'buses and their drifts, would sweep and gather all before them for miles, and that within two or three leagues from the shore. The minister of Crail, like his brethren by the sea, has a special allusion to the Greenland ships, which had been for years, but more especially after the failure of the fisheries, the grand hope of the Fife coast nigh forty years before, when the rival politicians, Sir John Anstruther and William Alexander, sent out the two big whalers from Anstruther, the one the Hawk and the other the Rising Sun ; many, if not most, of the crews were from Cellardyke. The adventure soon ended in the wreck of the first and the dismantling of the second ship ; but from that day the flower of the shore was more or less on board the whaling fleet, the stout old ships from Dundee or Dunbar or elsewhere, that chased the Greenland whale.



## CHAPTER VII.

## THE SORROWS OF THE SEA.

Life in every condition has its own lights and shadows, but with none do they come and go so much like the tints of autumn, the sunshine and the storm, as with the toiler on the deep. Where, for instance, is the widow's wail so often heard as when rising on the sea breeze, over the lofty topmast riven on the sands, or the gallant boat whelmed and lost in the angry waves? And these are not the griefs of yesterday, but the old world well knew and sadly wept the sorrows of the sea, though never perhaps so often and so bitterly as we of to-day. Nor if so is the reason far to seek. The ancient fisher was contented with his skiff, however small and rudely fashioned, but then he and his comrades scarcely ventured beyond the shadows of the land, or in such a situation that with ready oar they could escape almost with the first signal of danger on the winter sky. He had, indeed, no barometer or semaphore, but his storm signal jingled constantly in his ear; now in the cry of the sea bird, as in the rhyme—

“When you hear the burl cry,  
Let you the boatie lie;  
Twa ebbs and a flude,  
Be the weather ere so gude;”

or again, in the boom of the rising east wind on the islet skerries, when

“The stell begins to knell,  
An' Pillie begins to route,  
The Mayman cries unto his boys  
Turn the boat about.”

But still the old fathers did not always escape ; as then as now, disaster came : a sudden squall, a split in the plank, sent boat and crew to the bottom.

Thus in 1766 an Earlsferry boat was capsized in a gale, when, of the 18 fishers who dwelt in the old burgh, six met with a watery grave.

A mournful cry arose on the 15th of May 1765 at the shore of Pittenweem over the loss of a haddock fishing boat and eight men ; but it is so far pleasing to add that the widow and the orphan were not forgotten ; in particular the old Parliamenter of the East Neuk burghs, Sir Henry Erskine, who had lodgings in West Anstruther, sent fifteen guineas by way of a Christian gift.

Tradition has much to tell of similar catastrophes at Cellardyke. Grey heads no longer with us would say how, when the midnight sea was shining like silver in the harvest moon, a well-known sail was seen gliding like a spirit towards the shore. Suddenly a black squall, like the shadow of death, sweeps the lovely scene. It comes and goes, but the boat is seen no more. They are swift to the rescue ; but the floating wreck is only left to tell the fishers' fate.

An aged grandsire, passed to the silent land, had a touching story of the sea. Boat after boat had crossed the bar with the ebbing tide, but one crew had clung to the last chance of saving their gear, and night and the storm still saw them out on the raging deep. Few then thought of a pillow in Cellardyke ; even women and children waited and watched till morning on the lonely beach. " See, a boat, a boat !" at last cries one, pointing where, in the eye of day, the little craft comes heading to the shore. It is a terrible moment. Destruction seems to ride on the whirlwind, and death to sit on every billow that rolls and booms on the



reefs; but a brave hand is on the rudder, and the boat comes gallantly on. Again and again the crowd, after a long breath, see her rise like a sea bird on the waves, and the danger is lessening fast, when it is but the work of a moment, a wave leaps, like a treacherous enemy, towards the boat.

"She has broached to," rings out like a death cry, and the seas are over the doomed gunwale like the foam on the sunken skerrie. The shadows are still deep on the shore, but the work of death has been done. Already, as if in mockery, float and oar are cast to land. "They're a' drooned!" shrieks a bereaved sister. "I'm saved," a voice seems to answer from the grave, and they turned to find the only survivor of the wreck. This was Alexander Gardiner, one of an old crofter family on the barony of Kilrenny, and his story is soon told. The boat and his companions sank together; but at that very moment it seemed as if a strong hand had thrown deliverance to him out of the darkness, and breasting the waves on some floats which had become wrapped about him, he escaped with his life. A touching visitation was also long remembered by the winter fire. It occurred in the early years of the "sea dearth," when the herring, especially in the spring months, was often as scarce as the haddock. In this dilemma the cod and ling fishers baited their big hooks with the crab or "partane," which was fished by one of the crew in rotation working the creels while the boats were at sea. One day this solitary duty had fallen to the lot of broad-shouldered David Brown. The yawl was almost a stone cast in the offing of the little rock islet known as the Basket, and his neighbour saw him busy first with one trap and then with another, when, like a sudden flash, he tumbled over the gunwale, and disappeared in the sea. It was in full sight of the shore, and boat after boat raced to the scene, but all that could be done was to search

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for and recover the body. And this was soon accomplished, when the fatal secret was at once explained, for it seems that on returning the "fished" creel to the water the string or messenger had entangled with a button of his sea jacket, and thus in a moment of unsuspected danger, the hapless mariner was dragged into an untimely grave. In after years this occurrence was not the less memorable for a strange fatality, by which the father, as we now see, and his son and grandson all perished within gun-shot of the fatal shore.



## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE WRECKS AT CELLARDYKE HARBOUR.

We now pass on to notice two of the saddest tragedies that ever occurred on the Fifeshire coast. The scene of both was the old harbour of Cellardyke, where the first occurred on the 23d of September 1793, when seven men perished, and one survived, and the other on a February morning in the year 1800, or less than seven years later, when, by an extraordinary coincidence, seven men were again lost, and only one was saved. The earlier catastrophe, as may be inferred, was towards the close of the Lammas drave, which, as we have seen, has always been the great harvest of the shore. In those years, however, it was as much, if not more so, to the tradesman than with the fishers of the East of Fife; in fact, from Anstruther to Kingsbarns not a loom was in gear, not a lingle in birse, nor an axe and saw at work during the progress of the herring season. And this was not all, for if it so chanced that the weaver had been succeeding with his "customer wark," the souter's wife had nursed the child of a richer neighbour, or the wright had turned the penny in the last bargain with the laird and his trees, then it was the proudest day with the household, as being the first stepping stone to comfort and independence, to transfer the little hoard "from the hugger or the kist neuk" to the purchase of boat and gear.

These herring masters realised in the village or the barony what the poet has so eloquently sung of the yeoman in his shire; but be this as it may, none of the brave old race is so well remembered as the worthy Cellardyke wright, Alexander

Wood, who with six companions suffered on this fatal occasion. But let us first glance at the life story of ninety years ago. Alexander Wood, who is the progenitor of the numerous fishing family of his name in the East of Fife, was himself sprung, as there is reason to believe, from the distinguished Leith family, who first settled on the Fife shores in the person of the famous old Scottish Admiral, Sir Andrew of Largo. He was cradled in misfortune, but one lucky day the young wright met General John Scott of Balcomie, who was so interested in his story that he engaged him as house carpenter for the castle, when it was ringing with the life and beauty of his first wife, the brilliant but ill-fated Lady Mary Hay. Here he woo'd and won winsome Janet Galloway, one of the domestics from the Carse of Gowrie, with whom he removed to commence business and housekeeping in Cellardyke. "He's a usefu' man, Saunders," said the neighbours, as they saw him one day busy on the cabin of the new sloop, which Skipper Jack built in the yard above Craignoon, and the next perhaps hard at work on Stephen Williamson's barn, or again filling up a spare hour with such kindly offices as came so often to his hand as mending the spinning wheel or the creepy of the poor widow, or the lonely one that could only reward him with her blessing.

"He's a discreet man, Saunders," added the sagacious but fiery minister, William Beat, while referring to a sederunt of the Kirk-Session, which he attended after his election as one of the elders of the parish. Nevertheless he and the old Presbyter did not always coincide in the same opinion, as the following curious anecdote will tell:—A lone woman, overwhelmed, as charity is willing to believe, with misery and isolation, sick and weary, in short, of the great burthen, had first attempted self-destruction with a knife, and then accom-

plished it by hanging herself from a beam in the old house yet standing in George Street.

At this time the law continued so inexorable that it denied interment in the churchyard to the suicide, whose remains were usually buried in some old march or waste by the sea. Alexander Wood, however, thought and felt like a true Christian, and it is not forgotten that he went three several times to the manse to plead that the remains of the poor woman might be laid to rest amongst her kindred ; but the old minister, then verging on eighty, would not consent, and so the corpse, wrapped about and blood besmeared as it was cut down, was dragged through the window, and a hasty grave being scooped out near the golden strand, the body of poor Maggie Lawson was thrown in and covered up with as little ceremony as the carcase of a dog. The companions of such a man as Alexander Wood, whether on sea or shore, were sure to have more or less of his own character or sympathies, and accordingly when circumstances enabled him to launch his stout herring boat the crew was from the first spoken of as amongst the most sedate and cautious on the coast.

But on that bleak September morning they alone had faced the storm. The reason, however, is not far to seek. It was the last chance to save their nets, which were anchored not far from the shore. Still they were seen to hesitate before they began to climb down the rugged pier to gain the boat ; but remembering what they had to secure in the way of home comforts they at last pushed to sea. Most of them were landsmen, but the oars were plied so well that they had reached the outside of the skerries. The danger, indeed, was seemingly passed, when a great wave rose, like a ruthless enemy, and with scarce a moment's warning hurled her back upon the beacon rock. A weary cry echoes along the beach, to which

the neighbours rush in breathless haste in all directions. "A boat, a boat!" shouts an excited voice, and a hundred willing hands spring responsive to the call. But the task is in vain, and brave men stand still in anguish and despair. Here the children, the little children, sob and cling to their mothers, who rend the heavens with the wail of lamentation and woe; there on the bulwark a paralytic old man kneels and prays in his night clothes, as his grey hairs stream out in the bleak wind; and yonder on the pier a distracted wife, soon to be a mother, strives to bury her agony in the cruel sea, till she falls fainting in the arms of those around her.

It was the visitation of mercy, and her eye is shut. The foaming waves are swift as the messengers of fate on the path of destruction. And the struggle is short and decisive; one strong swimmer flings his arms in the air and disappears for ever. Two bosom friends cling together on the broken gunwale; but what is devotion and sacrifice to the pitiless surge? and they die together. A firm foot has gained a rock; but the enemy is on his trail, and the hapless fisher rolls back a bleeding and bruised corpse; and so the crew one by one perished, with the solitary exception of the youth James Martin, who is borne up amidst all the death and terror of the storm, as if an angel hand had been outstretched for his deliverance, till he landed unharmed on the high rock to leeward of the harbour.

Amongst those who suffered with Alexander Wood were the Anstruther shoemaker, Thomas Baldie, and Robert Donaldson, weaver, residing in Cellardyke. They, like the skipper and two others of the crew, were married—the household bereavements being in all five widows and seventeen orphan children. The survivor, James Martin, continued to make the sea the calling of his life. He was an honest and deserving man, and

marrying in his native town became the father of a family, who lived to do him honour ; but his end was so far a tragic one ; his grave is with the stranger—having fallen a victim to the dreadful visitation of cholera at the herring rendezvous of Wick in the Lammas of 1832. The second disaster by a singular coincidence has all the sad and thrilling horror of the first. The boat in this case was one of the seven engaged that spring from Cellardyke in the “keeling” or great line fishery. Then as now herring bait was indispensable for the big hooks ; but the drift being undreamed of it was fished according to ancient custom by nets anchored perhaps within hail of the shore. The boat was returning that fatal morning from this duty in the face of a rising south-east gale, when, on nearing the harbour, she was overwhelmed by a terrific wave, which swept her from the fairway towards the deadly reef, “the Skellie Point.” A death cry is on the sea, and a widow’s shriek is on the shore, for who can stay the avalanche ? and all is lost—rudderless and disabled the boat is crushed like frost work on the fatal rock. And the neighbours, foreseeing the danger, men and women have clambered on the pier, but no boat can brave that raging sea. “A rope ; a net will save them,” shouts one ; but, alas ! it was all in vain. “I see’t the noo,” said an eye witness hiding her face over the terrible scene of her girlhood, sixty years before, but fresh and vivid as of yesterday. “The cry’s in my lug yet,” wept another after a still longer interval ; and well may they have done so, for there at the feet of wives and children are the perishing ones, calling to them almost by name in their last agony, or with a look more melting still because of the unspoken prayer, as there in the seething waters they sink with all life’s jewels, full in sight of home and comfort, into the weary grave. And so the death scene closes on one and

all, save the solitary swimmer, William Watson, whose escape is one of the most romantic incidents of the coast. His companions had disappeared in the recoiling waves, but anticipating this danger he bade them all farewell, and divesting himself of his big jacket, plunged into the sea. "I felt as if I walked on the water," he told his friends, and so it almost seemed to others, so strangely was he borne on the great billow that swept him to the shore. Here another thrilling scene occurred. His devoted wife, Mary Galloway, had been one of the spectators of the fatal scene, and now in the heroism of woman's love, and with a strength that was not to be resisted by those around her, she rushed in to his rescue, and clasped him to her bosom, with no thought but the overflowing joy of the moment. Singular as it may appear, he stepped almost on the very spot of the *craw skellie* on which his townsman, James Martin, had landed as the single survivor seven years before.

William Watson, "Water Willie," as he was usually called after his extraordinary escape, was a fine specimen of a Scottish fisherman, one whose courage and endurance was as conspicuous as his strength and activity. He survived his faithful wife about two years, and died on the second of February 1850, at the good old age of 77.

The sufferers by the calamity of 1800 were—Philip Anderson, Leslie Brown, William Muir, Thomas Fowler, Thomas Smith, Thomas Christie, Andrew Robertson, most of whom being married men no fewer than three-and-thirty orphans were cast on the fatherhood of God.

Here the mournful record is so far complete; but in the earlier losses tradition has not even preserved the names of many, or rather of most of the victims. Some, however, still linger, like a far away echo, in the old familiar scenes. One of these is Skipper John Tarvit, the father-in-law of



the gifted master in the navy, Robert Lothian, whose memory dwells in many a kindly deed on Anstruther shore. Another is John Gardner, who came to Cellardyke to seek a home, but found a grave. There is also John Moncrieff, the gallant young fisher, who perished before the birth of his son Alexander, who taught the alphabet to three generations, and the art of navigation to more sea heroes than perhaps any other in Scotland. Aged friends have likewise often told us of the Kilrenny weaver, William Paterson, whose success at the herring fishing season after season was the talk of the coast, but who perished in one of the last days he was to tempt the seas. A yet more melancholy interest, however, is attached to the fate of this old father of the village. His sons clave to the land, but his grandchildren and great grandchildren of the name, who took to sea, have all perished in the waves.

