

## WITH THE LONG-LINE FISHERS ON THE EAST COAST.

“T was a bad day for us when these rib-rippers were invented, I tell ye,” hissed a hardy East-Coast fisherman through his teeth, as he stood on the stone pier of the little fishing village of Newhaven, on the Forth, and watched some South Shields men carrying ashore from a steam trawler boxes filled with fish of all varieties and sizes. “What it is to come to I dinna ken, but I suppose we’ll have to emigrate and try the banks of Newfoundland for cod,” he continued, his eyes flashing with indignation as he spoke.

“They seem to get lots of fish, however,” was my interruption, wishing to get him to join in a friendly conversation on a subject which I knew was getting every day more interesting.

“And bonnie fish, I should say,” glancing with contempt at some which were placed under our eye by one of the trawler’s crew—a stalwart fellow, clad in a jersey, with white, or rather yellowish coloured, woven knickers and long sea-boots. “Look at the backs of them, all harled and cut ; indeed, man, it’s a pity to see them—not like the good clean cod we lift off the hook, but all choked in the purse o’ the net, and then dragged along the bottom for miles, their gasping mooths filled wi’ muck. I wonder what the public would say if they only kenned hoo their fish are grippit noo?”

Knowing that he was only uttering the opinions of hundreds who followed his precarious calling, I thought I would try to lead him into conversation on a subject which was every day becoming more interesting, and found little difficulty in doing so. You have only, indeed, to ask the “line” men their ideas about beam trawling and you have a crowd round you at once, each expressing his opinions in very much the same strain as those of my new acquaintance. It is needless to state that much of what they say is irrelevant. They will talk about the bottom of the

sea as if they had lived all their days there, and not lived by dropping their lines from the top of it. They commence their expressions invariably with the remark, "It stan's to reason, sir, that a fish will," and then go on to liken the habits of fish to human beings, and finishing by asking you if, "under the same circumstances, you wouldn't do the same yoursel'." Scripture is even quoted against the new method, and one is often reminded of the invocations to the Deity when the Cheviot breed of sheep were introduced into Scotland, and according to Hogg, "Auld Wattie Brydon was wont to pray every night for two years running to be protected and defended from a' new-comers, however, *white* washed their faces might be, for they were but like whited walls and painted sepulchres, full of rottenness within." Politics are also dragged into the argument, and with ideas that the steam trawlers belong to members of the aristocracy, the expression, "But what can a puir fisher do against the Hoose o' Lords?" is not infrequently heard. Though they have a considerable amount of respect for the Fishery Board, so far as the herring fishing is concerned, they do not seem to value its services at all in regard to deep-sea fishing for haddock, cod, or halibut; and there is every reason to believe that not so much attention has been paid to this branch of our fishing industries as it deserves. Fishery Commissions do not seem to be so successful as they should, as there appears to be a pierhead flavour about the evidence tendered. The men who are always ready to communicate their ideas are those who prefer the shore to the sea, and the opinions given are drawn more from their imagination than from their practical experience; indeed, you continually meet with one of this class, who begins, as a rule, with such remarks as, "Says I to Mr. Buckland, says I," and then gives a long account of a conversation, which, if it really ever did take place, must have highly amused the well-known naturalist.

My new acquaintance was a man of a totally different description—a hardy, healthy, practical fellow from a little port on the other side of the firth, who had been forced to run into New-haven owing to the impossibility of making any other harbour in safety from the heavy weather which prevailed outside. He did not seem to have a high opinion of the men of the Lothian side of the Forth, who he ventured to observe, after the coast

was clear, "would never gang far to sea as lang as their wives would take the creels on their backs."

"You don't seem to approve of the fish-hawking system in vogue here, then?" was my reply.

"A fisher's place is in his boat at his wark, and a fisher's wife's place is at her ain fireside; but that's no matter o' mine—they don't seem to mak muckle o't, however."

As he was turning on his heel in order to walk over to his little craft, which lay close to the harbour wall, her halliard block rattling against the mast-head, while every now and then a slight sea caused a commotion amongst the fleet, and a creaking of their sides against the rough-hewn wooden fenders, I hinted that the wind was a little chilly, and that (motioning with my left hand in the direction of the well-known tavern at the head of the pier) a small drop would not be far wrong. "I don't mind," was his reply, and we adjourned. His reserve relaxed a little by the malt, and he let loose his opinions on trawlers and trawling in a manner which was more than forcible. A Government inquiry into the question did not seem to meet with his approval. "Government's faur too busy wi' the salmon," he said—"with the 'lordly salmon,'" he repeated with sarcasm, as he rammed home the tobacco into his newly-filled pipe. "It gies guid sport to the Hoose o' Lords, I suppose, and of course that's something to be considered; salmon and trout come in for their full attention, and the fish o' the puir folk are never thocht o'." Wishing to change the subject, as I saw he was drifting a little into what might be called fishermen's radicalism, not that he was wrong about the amount of attention given to the salmon as against the deep-sea fishing interests, I made some remarks about boats, hinting that the shape and rig might be improved in order to make them more safe, and that the Edinburgh Fishery Exhibition Committee had been offering prizes for the boats best adapted for East Coast fishing.

"I was at the show," he said. "We were driven into Leith that week, and saw the models; but it's all very weel making a boat that's *safer*, but a boat that'll be *moderately safe* and do the wark is what we want. If you build them deep, then with half o' the harbours getting stilted up like Newhaven here, how are ye to get in when the tide's low? A bonnie thing it would be to be stuck at the bar-mouth and the market going on, and

seeing boats drawing six or eight inches less water dancing awa by ye, and them laughing at your new wherry—no, no. If any man wishes to design a new boat for oor business he must come a wee bit faurer oot than the pierhead ; he must come oot and see us shooting our line and see us hauling it, and then he'll know the reason why we like the boats we have ; but it's time I was gaun ower to see about sailing. Gin ye care to come ye're welcome, only mind ye'll have rough, wet, cauld wark, and it'll be three days or mair gin ye're hame again. Oors is no a wark that there's much pleasure in. If ye think o' coming ye'll not do faur wrang to put on twa or three suits o' clothes on ye. I can gie ye some oilskins and a jersey, and if ye have a pair o' lang boots ye'll do."

Being only too glad of the opportunity of seeing the toilers of the deep at work, I lost no time in making preparations, and was soon made secure against the penetrating north wind by two suits of heavy tweeds and a pilot jacket, my legs to the knees being encased by a pair of heavy sailor's tops. A small portmanteau carried another spare suit, a good supply of the cratur, a pound of tobacco, a lot of clay pipes with the stems broken short off, and some hard-boiled eggs, for I was a little afraid of getting sick of fish diet. With this in my hand I stepped briskly down to the pier, and seizing the proffered hand of the skipper swung myself on board and went below. There is little head-room in an East-Coast boat, owing to the small draught of water, but still one cannot say that they are uncomfortable. The yachting Sybarite, who loves to let go his mud-hook in Cowes Bay, might miss his blue velvet cushions and his swing table, but these are the luxuries of a sailing life. The little stove which stood in the middle of the cabin floor, though cold within and rusty without, betokened cheer at times and a warm cup of tea, and that was something at least to feel happy about. Seizing my portmanteau, the youngest of the boat's crew made it fast under a wooden board or seat on the port side, and I was booked for the voyage as safe as an American emigrant outside of Queenstown. A short visit to the little village again for a look at the little weather-glass in the tower at the cross, a parting glass at the old place, and we were ready to follow the boat alongside which our craft had been moored, and which was now under her brown lug and mizzen,

making a straight road down past the north side of Inchkeith. In a few minutes after leaving the harbour for the ground we were laying over to the cold north wind which came sweeping down from the Ochil hills till the lee gunwale was churning up the foam like a rugged rock in the centre of a mill race. Winter weather is not the best for pleasure sailing, more particularly on the edge of the North Sea, but there are views of the land we can get when the sky is leaden and the hills are white which the yachtsman cannot realise in summer, as his craft fills her white wings to the light airs which raise catspaws on the water. Yet, however picturesque Dun Edin and Arthur's Seat may look against the background of the Pentland Hills, the weather-side of a brown-sailed Scottish fishing-smack is not the most comfortable place in the world to view them from, and we were fain to go down below, while a stout-built lad of 21 took hold of the tiller and looked out with a keen eye for the best channel he could steer through between the storm-steadied craft in Leith Roads. A little whiskey and water is a sure passport to a Scotchman's heart—indeed, it will take the gag out of the mouth of the most uncommunicative of all men—an Aberdonian; and with a little of that "blue clout," as it is termed in the northern capital, my fishing friend felt warm enough to enter upon a discussion upon the rights of fishermen, and Scottish fishermen in particular.

"We have not the slightest objection to the Englishmen coming up here," was his reply, "but they maun come to *fish* not to *destroy*. We go to Ireland ourselves, or round to the Clyde, or the Isle of Man, but nobody finds fault, because we use nets as they should be used, and hooks as they should be used, but the trawlers come here and scrape the whole bottom of the sea in the same style as you would a garden-walk with a rake. Fish get frightened out into deeper water; but not only that, their food is destroyed, for it's my opinion that things below the water are very much like things on shore, and seek their living from plant to plant, as bees do theirs from flower to flower. Destroy these plants by the heavy beam trawl dragging along the bottom, and your fish maun shift their feeding ground. Besides, too, look at the sma' fry they destroy. If you kill a fish at a quarter of a pund weight that in time would come to the hook at a quarter of a stone, look at the waste. But the

trawlers increase the fish supply, and Professor Huxley says the harvest of the sea is practically inexhaustible. Possibly they do bring in more fish; flat fish not so likely to be taken by the line, but I maintain that a trawled fish choked in the net is no more healthy than a smooed sheep, and you ken what 'braxy' mutton is. Fish killed off the hook are cleaner and better in every way; and as to the harvest o' the sea being inexhaustible, what does that matter to us if the fish are driven from the banks our fathers have fished before us for years, and we cannot follow them? We have no claim to the banks, no doubt; but we claim fair play, and steam trawling, as it is carried on, is unfair to every line fisher on this coast. But we'll not argue the subject. Let's have a look as to where we are."

Following him on deck, I found we were running past Inchkeith on our lee, and opening up the little fishing bays on the Fife coast, while Largo Law and the Ness of Elie loomed ahead. In each of these little land loops live colonies of hardy toilers of the sea, who venture out in all weather, fishing being their sole means of support. With the crofters of Skye and Barra, and the northern Highlands generally, they are not to be identified, as the latter are only amphibious, making out an existence by cultivating their wretched little crofts, so as to raise a boll or two of oatmeal, a bag of potatoes, and a lamb or two to be drawn at the "fank," and paid for when the weaning time comes round by the laird's factor. Though good hands with the herring-net, these men know little about the far more venturesome work of deep-sea fishing by line, in which the East Coast Scotchmen from Buchan Ness to St. Abb's Head are such adepts. A great many of the latter are of Norse descent, and they still retain all the Viking-like characteristics of their forefathers, venturing further out to sea than a West Highlander would ever dream of doing. While exceedingly superstitious, they are also exceedingly fervent in their religious devotions. No boat ventures out on a Saturday, and no sail is hoisted till twelve o'clock on Sunday night has struck. They have a strong love of home, and no matter though they may round Cape Wrath, and fish the edges of the outer Hebrides, and follow the herring as far south as Kinsale, the old place is not forgotten; back they come with the full hand rejoicing, or

the empty hand sorrowing, to cast their lines in the old waters.

With the Island of May looming out broad on our weather, and the Bass Rock on our lee quarter, sheets were eased a little to the still freshening breeze for the run out to the Dogger Bank, the favourite fishing ground of the men of the north-east coast, as the home of the halibut, the king of all deep-sea fishes, and one for which there is an unceasing demand for the London market. "Give me the head and shoulders of a halibut," said our skipper, taking his pipe from his mouth; "and so far as my own taste is concerned, ye could have the whole shot, though there's not much fault to find wi' a dory." The flavour of the halibut is, indeed, a long way in its favour, there being a shellfish-like relish about it, when cooked, which puts one in mind of the heather-like flavour of grouse, and this, together with its scarcity, always makes a strong demand for it, more especially in the Metropolitan market. "All good things go to London," says the steersman, with a smile, as, putting the tiller under his arm, he rummages the tobacco in his pipe with a pin, "and Londoners are too clever ever to let them back. What gluttons they must be for fish! for a' that we catch in the Firth of Forth never seems to be kenned to them."

"No, nor a few more other friths," was my reply, as I thought of the thousands all along the south coast who were toiling hard to supply the morning market at Billingsgate. Dusk falling brought out the stars and a few harbour lights along the coast, yet still, with sheets freed and a ripple at our stem, on we danced, till latterly the combers of the heavier waves were raising clouds of spray, and I was forced to retreat into the little cabin and enjoy my pipe as I half leaned, half crouched, in a corner. Taking another look out, I saw that there was more pleasure for the time being to be found under cover, as the seas were chasing each other along the decks, and making it appear as if they would like to sweep everything overboard. Following the example of two of the crew of six, I buttoned up the neck of my coat and fell fast asleep. Next morning, after having had my slumbers repeatedly broken by the heavy thrashing of the sea against the boat's bows, I got on deck and found that we were right out at sea, our little craft's head still pointed for that happy fishing ground, where awaited our coming, no doubt, the savoury

halibut and "turbot sweet and succulent." Little brown specks in the horizon ahead our steersman, who was doing his trick of the tiller in the absence of the owner, who had gone below, informed us were boats out of Anstruther and Cellardyke, going down to the grounds like ourselves, while a couple of steam tugs astern were trawlers going home to catch the market. With little warmth, sailing out to the Dogger Bank is anything but pleasant work, and the Corinthian crew of a five-ton yacht, who have done a stormy passage in summer from Holyhead or the Clyde to Kingstown, would find their craft much more comfortable than an East Coast fishing-smack.

It was not till the shades of night had darkened again that we had reached that point where the owner had decided to shoot his line, and preparations were made to break the by this time to me disagreeable monotony. The sun had just died down, leaving a sickly yellow glare on the western horizon, betokening wind and wet, and the breeze seemed to take courage in the darkness, and sweep down on us with increased strength.

Each man having securely fastened his oilskins round him, so that the wind cannot get in, the herrings for bait are brought on deck, and the hooks, all bare, arranged round a small piece of wood placed in the lee side. In the case of haddock and "short line" fishing, the hooks are all baited with mussel or clams arranged in a box or basket and run over a roller held by a man in the stern, as the boat holds on her course; but when shooting the long line the hooks must be baited as they are thrown over. As the night promised to be pitch-dark and the sea heavy, the men fasten a lantern so that its light will be cast upon the bare hooks and the bait box, and make themselves fast to the centre of the boat in case of their getting washed overboard, as both hands have to be used in their operations. The sheets having been trimmed, the skipper takes his place at the tiller, and sitting up grimly as a Viking of old, the salt spray crusted on his shaggy brown beard, steers a straight course, so that, without the wind shifting, they shall be able to haul the line again on the return without tacking. All is ready; the buoy with the flag-staff which marks the end of the line has been thrown over, and the work has commenced. The wind whistles shrill at times in the halliards, and pipes every now and then a deeper note through the block at the mast-head, while the

sea races over us from bow to stern till we are waist-deep. Yet, regardless of wind or sea the work goes on as regularly as if the men were on the pierhead at home. Hook after hook is picked up, the bait knife flashes in the glimmer of the lanterns, the bit of herring is affixed, and away it goes in the darkness and the flying foam. Each man takes his turn, and each hook must go without delay, baited or bare, for if the line be checked for a moment all that has gone over will be ravelled. Now and then a bigger sea seems to catch the night-penetrating eye of the steersman, and there is a warning call and no more—the boat dashes through it and holds on midst the spindrift and the flying snow shower, which can only be detected in the light of the lantern to leeward out against the darkness. Suddenly the heads of all are turned to windward, as if something were expected from that direction. There is a sudden flicker on the top of a wave a short distance off, which disappears as the men, who have never missed a hook, bend their eyes down to their work again. It is only another boat engaged in shooting a little higher up to windward, that is all. Hook and knife and herring, herring and hook and knife; the work goes on as fast as the little craft can keep sailing, each of the men watching well that he shall not get caught, for should he get fastened to the line he may be dragged overboard and drowned, as the weight of that portion already shot will take him down. Only a month ago they will tell you that one of their number was hooked in the hand, and was dragged to the stern crying mournfully, “Lads, I’m gane! I’m gane!” and “gane” he would have been had not his comrades caught firm hold of his legs and held fast till the hook broke. But the risk of death from hooking is too great for them not to take some precaution against it, so that strapping young fellow who sits close to the steersman, with his knife glittering in the fitful flashes of the light, is hard on the watch for a foul. One cry from the men engaged in baiting, and with a sweep of the blade the line is severed and the life saved; and should he miss, heaven have pity on him—that’s all. Smashing through the white and green water for about five miles, the line has been run out, and the work of hauling has to be commenced. Fish bite at the bait as the hook reaches the bottom, not (as many suppose) as it lies on the ground, and so little time between shooting and hauling has to be allowed, the



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regular interval as a rule being five minutes. Though not so grandly picturesque as the shooting, the process of hauling is not less interesting. As the line has to be taken over the bow, the tack of the lugsail has to be fixed on the crane in the lee-side in order to be out of the way. Should the wind be dead ahead the boat beats back to the other end of the line, and hauls in the direction that the line has been shot. Sometimes, though, the line is lifted by the boat making short tacks, and in such cases the great depth of water forward, which yachtsmen object to in East Coast boats, as causing a tendency to broach to when running, helps to steady the craft in a sea-way, and so cause no undue strain upon the line. Lying-to for a time, we set the stove aglow before starting on our return voyage, and the men seemed to be thawed into fresh life by the boiling tea which they poured over their throats. Getting on deck again the boat was reached slowly along the wind, every length of herself bringing some new arrival. Heavy headed cod, soft-mouthed as a fawn, came to the bows, reluctantly followed by the long, lean ling, and were chucked forward to join their dead brethren, clear-eyed and green backed, as all fresh cod should be. Then came turbot, ever welcome, followed at times by a halibut or a brill, while huge skate flapped and wobbled and fought in vain to get back to their homes at the bottom. There were many curious fish that were not welcome, and were dismissed with slight imprecations, and many that the keepers of aquariums would have been glad to have kept, but for which there was no common market. A good snug repast, and a chat round the stove, another shot of the line, another haul, and with as good a store of fish as was ever lifted off the Dogger Bank we are running with sheets squared off to an easterly breeze for New-haven again, each man anxious to get in in time for the market, for a fish is perishable the moment it is taken from the sea. A market missed, and the result of all the hard, dangerous, cold work may be lost. Altogether, it is a most precarious living the men make who fish.

#### THE CAULD NORTH SEA.

Sing ho ! my men, to the halliards bend,  
And hoist the tan-brown sail ;  
The wind is light, but ere the night  
It will blow a good half-gale.'

The drum's on the pier and the hills look near,  
 And there's weather gaws on our lee ;  
 But the cupboard's toom and the fire is dim,  
 And sae we maun oot to see.

The man's no richt that gangs oot the nicht,  
 Is the cry o' the unco wyse ;  
 But the lass steps weel that carries the creel  
 That's laden wi' cauld advice ;  
 So bend, my lads, to the halliards lend  
 Your weight, and let's go free ;  
 Let the wind blow bold, let the wind blow cold,  
 We will fish the cauld North Sea.

Frae an angry sea let the coward flee  
 Who can face a hungry wean ;  
 Better the drift o' a cauld, cauld rift,  
 Than the sicht o' a cauld hearthstane.  
 So her helm, boys, ease to the tumbling seas,  
 And let our bark go free ;  
 Be it coarse or fine, we maun shoot our line,  
 And fish in the cauld North Sea.

We have wives, my men, we have lives, my men,  
 And eke we have lines and bait ;  
 So the cod and ling we'll hameward bring,  
 And the halibut and the skate.  
 And better fare wha wad want mair ?  
 So let our bark go free,  
 Nae wife or wean will e'er complain  
 While there's fish in the cauld North Sea.