

THE TUNNY FISHERIES OF SARDINIA.

BY H. LE MESURIER.

THE tunny fish is a product of the warm seas near the Equator, but in the month of March it begins to migrate towards the Mediterranean in shoals of thousands and tens of thousands. Those that escape the wholesale slaughter which takes place in the tunny fisheries begin to return from where they came soon after the month of June. A smaller kind of the same fish is indigenous to the Mediterranean Sea, remaining hidden in its depths during

and especially the one named Isola Piana, which belongs to the Marchese di Villamarina, whose mother is the first lady-in-waiting to Queen Margherita of Italy. The accompanying photos have been kindly given by him to the writer.

A description of the way the tunny is entrapped and killed will, doubtless, be novel to most readers. The method by which they are caught can be traced back to ancient times. The vast nets, made of thickest cords, are

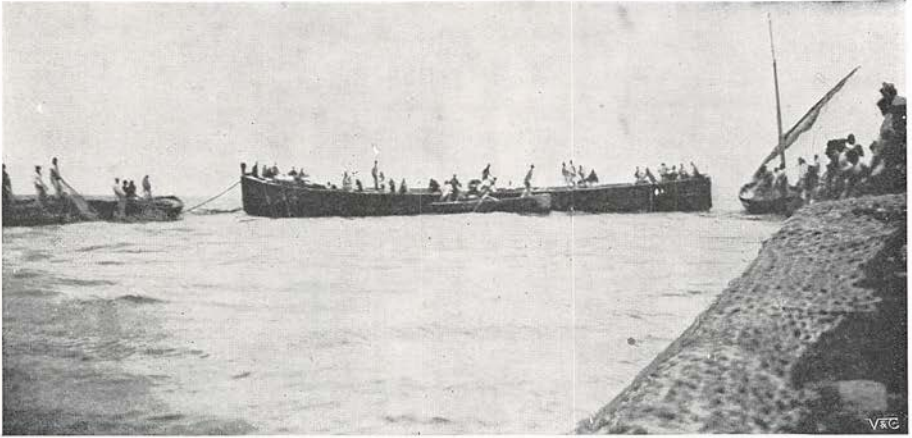


SPEARING THE FISH.

the winter months, and emerging to the surface in March.

Pure and salubrious water is necessary to them, and the slightest impurity disturbs and causes them to deviate from their natural course. Though one of the largest species of fish, they are exceedingly timid, and a few handfuls of sand flung in their midst throws them into disorder and puts them to flight. Use is made of their natural timidity by those who are employed in these fisheries, and by many a simple artifice they are induced to pass into the compartments of the *tonnara*, as the tunny fishery is called, where they are finally slaughtered. There are many of these *tonnare* in southern Italy, but some of the most important are those on the coast of Sardinia,

generally between 400 and 500 yards long, and form a corridor which ends in different compartments, or chambers, as they are usually called. The fish enter these in search of food, and as they pass from one to the other, it is impossible for them to turn back or escape, unless it be during a tempest, when the violence of the waves breaks or loosens the cords of the nets. These are kept in a vertical position, being anchored to the bottom at one end, and attached to the surface of the water at the other by floating pieces of cork. They are distant about a mile from the shore. Each compartment has a depth of thirty metres, and a length of about forty metres on each side. The last of these is called the *corpus*, or "chamber of death," and is the only one that has a bottom to it

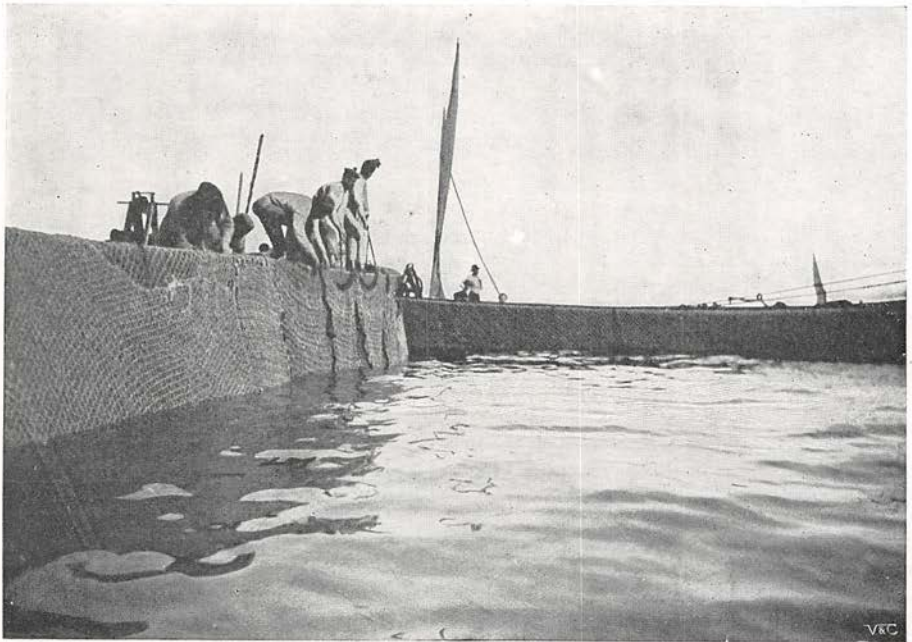


BOATS FORMING A SQUARE IN ORDER TO DRAW UP THE "CORPUS" PREPARATORY TO THE SLAUGHTER.

as well as sides, and a door made of cords and level with the lower part of the net, which is raised like a portcullis when the fish are driven into it at the time the *mat'anza* or slaughter is about to take place. The course of the tunny is always towards the east, and they guide themselves by the left eye, and this must be always borne in mind by those who lay the nets.

The *rais*, as the head of the tunny fishery is called, frequently visits them, and from his boat he can approximately count the number of the fish ensnared. When it

appears to him that there are sufficient to make it worth while, he presents himself to the director-in-chief of the *tonnara*, and gives him an account, not only of the number, but also of the quality of the fish he has seen, whether they are chiefly large, small, or of middle size. If the *mat'anza* is agreed upon, the crews of the different boats to be employed are sent for, being generally not less than 120 men. The next day before dawn the *rais*, together with the most experienced of the sailors, after ascertaining that the weather is favourable.



SAILORS FASTENING ONE SIDE OF THE "CORPUS" TO THE BOAT IN FORMING THE NECESSARY SQUARE.

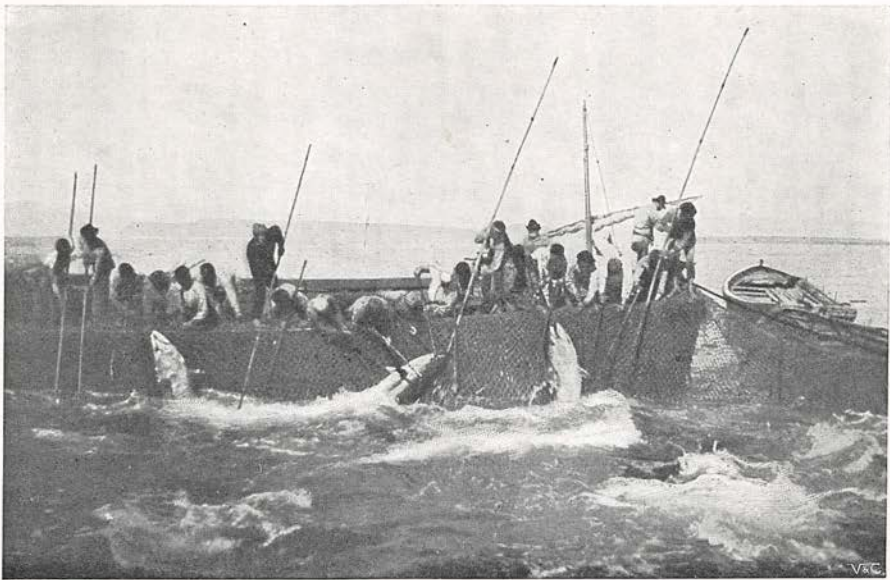


EACH TRIES TO KILL THE GREATEST NUMBER.

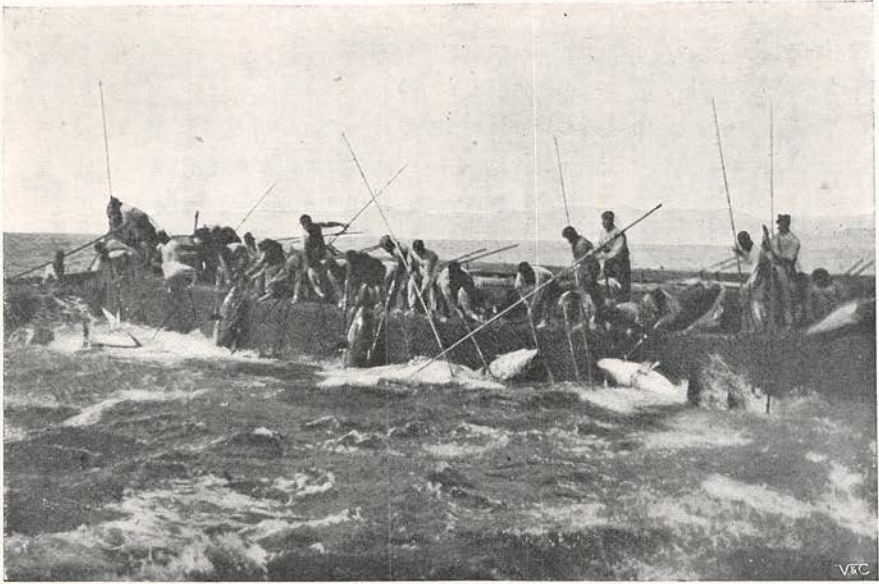
begin to make the necessary preparations. The large boats are laden with harpoons, pikes, lances, and other necessary instruments.

Bread, wine, and various provisions are also embarked. The clothing of the men is of the lightest, the exercise they are about to engage in being of the most violent description, and it is necessary that their limbs should be perfectly untrammelled. On

arriving at the nets the fish are again counted, and the boats form a square, the small one, in which the *rais* remains alone, being in the centre immediately over the *corpus*. When all are in their places the men take off their caps and prayers are said. Different saints are invoked, and especially St. Peter, as the chief patron of fishermen. Those who are leading the prayers, which are chanted, end



IN KILLING THE FISH, CARE MUST BE TAKEN NOT TO MUTILATE THEM.



THE ORDER TO KILL IS AGAIN GIVEN.

them with the following invocation, "O Lord! give us a successful fishery!" to which the crews reply, "*Dio lo faccia!*" or, "May God grant it!" When the prayers are over, the *rais* asks the captains of the different boats whether they are all ready, and on their replying in the affirmative the drive of the fish begins. The largest compartment, which immediately precedes the chamber of death, is the one where the greater number of fish are collected, and where they swim round and round in a circle, which must be broken in order to force them to pass into the *corpus*. As soon as they have entered it the door is raised, so as to prevent their escaping into the other compartments. The crews of the boats which surround the net begin to raise it gently. The *rais* from his boat encourages the men, and now and again dashes water upon them, which refreshes them while they work, and the cry is often heard, "Water, water, *rais!*" A peculiar monotonous song is

sung, which encourages them and lightens their labour as they work. When the net is raised and drawn in by degrees, the *rais* from his boat watches and directs the operation, because if it is not raised equally by all the sailors, the fish may easily escape. If the sea be not perfectly smooth, the difficulty is increased. When the fish perceive they are being surrounded by the net, which is drawn towards the boats, they make violent efforts to escape, and as they lash the sea with their tails, the water is dashed over the men till they are wet through. In the violence of their struggles the fish soon lose their



THE MEN WASH THEMSELVES IN THE SEA AFTER THE FIGHT.

strength, and then the eyes of the sailors turn to the *rais*, in expectation of the signal that the slaughter is to begin.

He is at too great a distance for the sound of his voice to reach them, so he raises his hand, and at the same time whistles loudly, which is the sign for them to fall upon the fish. Each tries to kill the greatest number, and there are often disputes between them when two have by chance wounded the same tunny, each asserting that it falls to his share, and the *rais* has to act as umpire between them. In killing the fish, care must be taken not to mutilate them, as they should be given whole into the hands of those whose duty it is to prepare them. When about two-thirds have been destroyed, the signal is given for the slaughter to cease, and any sailor who does not leave off immediately is fined.

The reason of this is that the smaller fish are those which remain, and they can be more effectually destroyed when by a fresh operation they are drawn into a part of the *corpus* where the cords are so thick and close that they are impeded from forcing their way through. The order to kill is again given, and is so carried out that not a tunny remains alive. When it is ascertained that not a single one remains in the nets, they are again lowered, and the heavily laden boats draw off from the spot where the slaughter has taken place, the sea being covered with blood as far as eye can reach. The number of the fish slaughtered is again counted, and the crew then throw themselves into the sea to wash off the blood with which they are covered, before changing their clothes and returning to the shore. The *rais* alone remains behind in his small boat to see that all is right with the nets, and whether any fish are already beginning to enter them. Most of the large *tonnare* have an establishment not far from the landing place, where the tunny is prepared. About two hundred persons are on the beach awaiting the arrival



MENDING THE NETS.

of the boats. Able-bodied porters are ready to carry the fish on their shoulders, the weight of each one varying from 20 lb. to 200 lb.

After opening and cleaning them, the parts of the intestines which can be used are divided among the sailors, in proportion to the number they have killed, and they return home with their spoils, singing joyously as they go. The fish carried to the establishment to be cured number from several hundreds to a thousand. The heads are cut off and placed to dry, and are afterwards boiled, and the oil which is extracted from them is used in the preparation of leather. The bodies of the fish are hung up by their tails, as they must be entirely drained of every drop of blood before they can be cured. They are then placed on tables, where they are quickly cut up and boiled in large cauldrons. The men who prepare them are those who during the winter months make the barrels in which they are placed as soon as they have been allowed to cool. The tunny is easily spoiled if there be the slightest carelessness in the preparation of it for exportation, and only the most experienced workmen are employed. The work must be done with the greatest celerity, and a thousand tunny fish are frequently prepared in the course of forty-eight hours. The barrels and tins in which they are placed are filled with oil. The inferior parts are cured with salt alone and sold on the spot at low prices.

The tunny is much used in all parts of southern Italy, especially during Lent. It can be cooked in such a way as to resemble veal, and, even simply prepared with oil, is a most nutritious kind of food.

Those who have never seen a tunny fishery can hardly realise the amount of labour and expense which it entails. The *mattanza*, or slaughter, of the fish I have described, though lasting but a few hours, leaves the strong men who take part in it with stiff and aching limbs for many days afterwards.

Owing to the number of persons to whom it gives employment, it is one of the greatest resources of the otherwise poor and neglected island of Sardinia, notwithstanding its being

taxed out of all proportion to what the industry yields.

The *tonnara* of Isola Piana is infested by sharks, which are attracted by the odour of the tunny fish. They frequently succeed in seizing one of these with their teeth, devouring with a single bite the belly, which is the part most prized. On one occasion a shark followed the boats conveying the fish so close inland that it was stranded. The proprietor's dog, seeing the huge creature struggling on the sand, ran backwards and forwards into the water, barking furiously the whole time. The Marchese, who from a window was watching the scene, had the satisfaction of seeing his dog saved by the sailors, and the shark destroyed.



APPLE-BLOSSOM.

A Photographic Study by H. Trévis.