

## The Fish Pot of the Caribbean Sea.

By

Edward M. Earle, Jamaica, W.I.

THIS method of taking the fish alive is, I believe, peculiar to this sea and its neighbouring waters. Indigenous or non-indigenous matters but little in that which follows; it is sufficient to state that pot-fishing forms about the only mode of capture practised in these regions for supplying the people with fresh fish.

I say *about* the only mode of capture practised, but there are some exceptions. Of nets, here and there, a seine, a turtle, and a mullet will occasionally be found, but a drift, a trammel, and a trawl will be searched for in vain. Hand-lining is only occasionally practised, and whiffing only under exceptional circumstances, as the canoe travels from land to the pot, between the pots, and back to land; and during the king fish season a kind of bulter or trot may now and then be met with under the local name *palanca* or *palanque*—most probably derived from the Indian—but it is very rare, and these go to make up the auxiliaries.

While the fish are never taken from the pots in an offensive condition, they are more frequently than not in an unfit condition for food ere they reach the consumer, a state of things not very creditable to a country not more than one generation behind the rest of the world. But we look and hope for a change in these our fishy matters ere long.

It will perhaps be advisable if mention were made here that in writing of the fish pot of the Caribbean Sea I refer more particularly to those around the coast of this island and immediate waters; and although slight differences may exist in construction and working, in and around some of the other islands and the mainland, these differences are of so slight a nature as to call for no special mention.

It is to be regretted that in a country like this, consuming millions of pounds weight yearly of imported dry and wet cured fish, having a sea teeming with myriads of fine edible fish, the waters subject to no or very rarely to meteorological disturbances, where as a rule boats may fish and work for months together without interference from the elements, the people should remain content to depend upon outside energy and capital, and the feeble, very feeble, labours of a

handful of fishermen—so-called—working but four or five hours out of the twenty-four, and employing a system of capture—not altogether devoid of some merit—that existed three hundred years ago, for so important a factor of daily life and universal economy. And yet it is so not only here but all through the beautiful islands in our seas.

The fish pots of the Caribbean Sea are made of various shapes and sizes, an individual idea monopolising their construction. They are made principally of the bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris*) and occasionally of the wild cane, but wherever the former plant is ubiquitous, and the growth of the latter partial—growing on the banks of streams and in the vicinity of water, but loving best the running water—nine tenths, or more, are made of bamboo. But those made from the calamus are much preferred, for besides, lasting nearly double the time they are exempt from the ravages of the sea maggot or worm, which plays sad havoc in the spring months with the bambusa.

Fish pots are made of various shapes as well as sizes, for some are square, some oblong, but generally they are shaped zig-zag like the frame of Coleman's agricultural harrow. They are usually made of three sizes, and the size is denoted by the number of entrances or funnels, such as one funnel (smallest size), two funnels, and three funnels (the largest).

In building a pot the maker first of all proceeds, with the aid of a matchette and strong sharp knife, to split the long canes into strips of from one half to three quarters of an inch wide, and then thins them down to one eighth or one twelfth of an inch thick, according to the size of the pot to be made. When a sufficient number of these long pliable laths are prepared the plaiting commences and is performed in a rapid manner on a level piece of ground, the plaits usually resting on one knee. The width of the pot is determined by the number of meshes forming the first row, and these being completed the work proceeds rapidly, the mesh being hexagonal and from three quarters to one inch from angle to angle. The plaiting invariably takes place on the spot where the bamboo grows, under the shelter of an adjacent clump, or a neighbouring mango or other tree. When the three or more sections of which the future pot is to be composed—the top, the bottom, and the sides—are completed, they are rolled into a somewhat large cylindrical parcel, and conveyed on the head to the beach of the fishing village, where they are spread out on the sand to straighten and lose the curve the temporary rolling has produced. When quite flat and the bend or curve gone the building of the pot commences. This is conducted in the following manner:—First of all the long side piece or pieces are

placed on edge so as to assume somewhat the shape the pot is intended to take. Upon this upstanding trellis the future top of the pot is placed, and its edges firmly laced to the upper edge of the side piece by the branches of a strong and durable withe locally known as the vine or bine pear (*Cereus triangularis*). When this lacing has been completed all round the incomplete structure is turned completely over, the top, or already laced section, now lying on the ground. The bottom piece is now placed in position, as was the first, or top, and similarly laced all round. The plaited funnels, or entrance mouths, already introduced into the pot's interior, are now placed in position between the top and bottom sections, and these are also lashed firmly by pieces of the same withe. When all the lacing and tying has been completed, a straight stick of from one and a quarter to one and a half inches in diameter and some six inches longer than the pot's depth, is placed in each corner of the pot, passing through the extreme corner meshes of both top and bottom sections, and these are firmly lashed in position.

The pot lying on the flat surface of the sand causes these upright pieces, or posts, to project or extend upwards, about four or five inches, through the upper or bottom section, and these form four legs or supports, biting the rock, grass, or sand upon which the pot is eventually set. To these four posts are first lashed and then nailed two long, round poles which cross each other in the centre of the pot, and they are firmly lashed along their entire length, giving to the structure stability and strength.

The bottom or under side of the pot now being complete, the structure is turned over, and two other poles are placed in similar positions over and along the top, lashed and nailed to the four corners upright.

The curved or bent heads or mouths of the funnels are now brought up against the top and firmly secured in position by lashing. When thus fastened these funnels have their inner ends raised against the top side of the pot, their mouths, which are pear-shaped, turning downwards. The next thing is the introduction of four stones, the size and weight depending upon dimensions of the pot, and these are lashed, one in each corner at the bottom, to act as sinkers and subsequently weights, when the pot is set and lying in position.

The finishing stroke now only remains, and this is done by attaching the cable to the two cross-poles at the point of intersection, which should be as nearly as possible over the centre of the pot. To this cable are attached withe stays which are run from the cross-poles, and these prevent the pot turning or swaying from side to side. The engine is now ready to be taken to sea and deposited as a submarine trap for fish, many of whom enter the funnels and

having passed through the pear-shaped mouths find themselves in a cul-de-sac and unable to get out.

The cables used for fish pots are usually of two kinds; either the large and strong pliable stems of curtain withes, or a two-ply rope made from the shredded leaves of the silver thatch (*Thrinax argenticola*). Of the withes those generally used are the velvet (*Cissampelos pareira*) and the large milk (*Melastelma parviflorum*), and, when they can be procured, the Iron and Old Tom withes. As may be supposed, it is not always possible to obtain these withes of the requisite size and strength for the larger pots, and when this is the case the cable is formed by twisting two or more together into a rough rope. These withes are of great value to the sea-fisherman, for with the silver thatch they form not only cables but cordage, and it is seldom that a yard of imported manufactured rope is seen in a fishing village or on the canoes. The withes and thatch above enumerated are not only strong but very durable, outlasting the pots, and under favorable circumstances, with care, a cable will serve two sets of pots. These withes are found and collected in the woods, suspended from large trees, or like tendrils encircling trunks and branches.

There is no more useful and valuable plant to the fisherman of these seas than the silver thatch, which on rocky soils and in droughty districts grows in great abundance. This small thatch plays an important part in the fisherman's economy as from its leaves he manufactures all his cordage and much of his cables.

The leaf is fan-shaped, the upper surface a bright glazed green, the under-leaf a silvery-grey and velvety, growing to a diameter of from two to three feet. The plant is usually found only a few feet in height, but will grow if undisturbed to a height of ten to twelve and fifteen feet. The leaves when required for twisting are shredded off the centre stalk which runs along its whole length, and these shreds are then twisted into a two-ply rope for cordage, a three-ply with thicker strands being used as cables. These ropes and cordage are exceedingly strong, their tensile strength being considerable, and the action of the salt water has very little effect upon their durability. The fishermen and fisherboys are adepts at twisting this thatch, and I have watched and known a boy of twelve or thirteen years get through his twenty-five fathoms in a day, not of continuous but spasmodic work, every now and again leaving off to spend ten or twenty minutes at a time in the waves as they roll up the sandy beach.

The pot now being ready for use is taken out to sea and lowered at some desirable spot, the locality and depth being selected to suit the idiosyncrasies of the owner. If snappers (*Messoprion uninotatus*, and *M. chrysurus*) are wanted the pot will be deposited in from ten

to twenty-five fathoms; if other and mixed fish then the depth will vary and run down to fifty and sixty fathoms according to the nature of the bottom and the principal fish sought. They are almost invariably set without bait of any kind, but in some localities some bait, such as dead sprats, viscera, and salted herrings (enclosed in fine netting), are attached to some part of the inner pot.

The cables to which the pots are attached are arranged as follows. Should the depth of water be thirty fathoms the cable is made to measure one fourth more, or forty fathoms. Two thirds of the depth, above the pot, a matured piece of bamboo, about six feet long, is securely fastened and floats suspended in mid-water, and this buoy keeps the lower portion of the cable continually taut. The upper end of the cable is attached to a similar piece of bamboo, and this is allowed to swing and play about, serving for a mark to identify and recover the pot when it is visited for the purpose of examination.

Under favorable conditions a pot will last for months, appearing bi-weekly or tri-weekly, as shall be required, at the surface, to have its contents transferred to the bottom of the dug-out; but—and it sometimes happens—a storm may carry away the upper and identifying bamboo and the pot is lost for ever, for the fisherman seldom tries to recover except in shallow water. An unusually strong current will perhaps carry the whole structure away, and in this case it is sometimes recovered. Should the pot not be visited for a week or more, its finny contents accumulating the while, some member of the shark family may utterly destroy its wicker sides to feast upon the enclosed captives, or a devil-fish will sever the bamboo buoys and leave the pot below unconnected and irrecoverable.

When set the fish pot is visited usually every other day, sometimes twice, occasionally only once a week. When this longer interval occurs some reason may be assigned for the delay. If the pots were visited daily they would yield a larger harvest, but then the Carib fisher believes in "letting to-morrow take care of itself," and carries out his belief. A pot made of matured bamboo will withstand the action of the salt water and the worm, and remain serviceable for from six to eight months and in some cases a month longer; one made from the wild cane four to six months longer than the bamboo. The silver-thatch cable, like the withes, will invariably outlast the pot.

When a pot is *hauled*, as it is termed, it is brought to the surface by means of the cable, and when alongside the canoe it is turned on end, the fish shaken into one corner from which they are extracted by the hand, through a small gate or gap left purposely for that purpose. When all are transferred to the canoe the gate is closed, refastened, and the pot returned to its watery home. It is

rarely a pot is lifted without containing fish; frequently great numbers, eight, ten and twelve dollars' value, are taken in the large deepset pots at a single haul.

In isolated cases where a fisherman can command the services of a large canoe, thirty feet or so in length, pots of extra large size are set in deep water down to 100, 120 and more fathoms, and when these are so set they more than repay for extra energy. These deep-sea pots require to be made of extra strength, and as it is only here and there a canoe can be found large enough to work them, they are very few and very far between.

The fishing canoe is a splendid boat, buoyant as a cork and as staunch as a lifeboat. They are made from the single trunk of the silk cotton tree, the *Bombax cieba* of botanists, shaped and dug out by adze and axe, and when properly shaped and thoroughly fitted, which they seldom are, no faster or safer boat exists.