

A HARVEST OF THE SEA.

BY W. G. FITZ-GERALD.

From pearls to herrings, the sea yields many harvests; but almost without exception men have to go and get them. There is one yield, however, within

for a farm is whether or not he is a resident of the district. If he is not his application is rejected, but if he be willing to settle down in the island and work for its welfare, a plot of arid shingle is allotted to him.

The farm is peculiar in another respect, for the ten-

which comes before Monday morning will take back into the bosom of the sea forever the proffered gift.

There are Biblical laws about the removal of a neighbor's landmarks defining the boundaries of his farm. Such offenses are considered so serious that a man may not only be heavily fined, but also lose his farm absolutely.

The harvest is at its height during the months of July and August. In some regions there is a kind of "close time," and harvesters can only gather the weed during those months. Other districts, however, permit their farmers to take advantage of the vast quantities of "varech" cast up by the winter gales.

The outfit of the seaweed farmer is simple enough. It consists of a few long-handled picks and rakes, a few long knives, some carts and horses, with the necessary laborers. It is worth noting that the carts used to remove the harvest are far smaller than those employed by ordinary agriculturists. This is in order that when fully laden they may not sink their wheels too deeply into the sand or shingle of the shore. Some farmers use special carts with barred sides, so that the sea-water shall drain off from the weed in transit. The draft horses are mere sturdy ponies; and so deep is the road with sand and stones, that one will frequently see a cart laboring along with three and four animals harnessed tandem fashion.

Most of the farmers, by the way, kiln their weed before selling it, but there are many who do not possess a kiln of their own, and sell it in stacks as it stands on the seashore at about \$1.50 a ton. This is a very low price, considering that seaweed is one of the best manures known to agriculturists. It is commonly put on the soil and permitted to rot. Many farmers, however, use only the ashes left in the kiln after the weed has been burnt. These ashes are considered to possess really marvelous properties as fertilizer.

It costs a local farmer about \$100 to build a kiln, but should he be unable to afford that sum, the curious little farm council already mentioned will kiln it for him at certain stated fees, the regulation of which is



Loading the Carts with Seaweed Previously Collected at Low Tide.

the reach of the very humblest. He may not be endowed with lands, or possess the necessary ability and patience for agriculture, but he can go down to the sea beach without a cent and gather in a bountiful harvest.

It is in the well-known Channel Islands off the British coast that seaweed farming is carried on systematically and scientifically. The "crop" is also cultivated off the coast of Cornwall, and in many countries of Europe—especially where the tremendous Atlantic gales sweep up this valuable commodity in huge banks, all ready for the harvesters. In such places the industry gives employment to hundreds of men and women.

In the islands of Jersey and Guernsey especially, hundreds of tons of seaweed were formerly exported to the mainland of England for fertilizing purposes; but of late years the immense and increasing market gardening industry of the islands themselves has found use for all the seaweed gathered. As much as 3,000 tons may be harvested in a single season, when nearly 60,000 cartloads are removed from the beach. The weed is not only retailed in open market to agriculturists, who value it highly as fertilizer, but it is also largely bought by chemical manufacturers of the islands and mainland, who distill iodine from it.

One finds on inquiry that these regular seaweed "farms" have been in existence for nearly four hundred years, and there are many quaint old laws and customs connected with them. Each seaweed district has its own local council, made up of successful farmers, and these bodies allot to each man his farm. This curious piece of property is merely a stretch of beach, from which the tenant is permitted to gather all the weed that a bountiful sea may cast up.

The farmer, however, is obliged to obey a regular code of by-laws, infringement of which may mean considerable fines. Guernsey especially supports home industries and the first question asked of an applicant

ant pays no rent whatever, so that his only expenses are those of kilning and harvesting. Each farm is marked out with big boulders, and may consist of from 400 to 600 yards of beach. All seaweed cast up within this area is the absolute property of the tenant.



A Laden Cart on the Shore.

One of the strictest by-laws is that forbidding a man to gather "varech"—as the weed is called locally—on a Sunday. Very tempting is it to break this rule during a great storm on Saturday night, when vast quantities of the profitable weed are thrown upon the beach, with the absolute certainty that the high tide

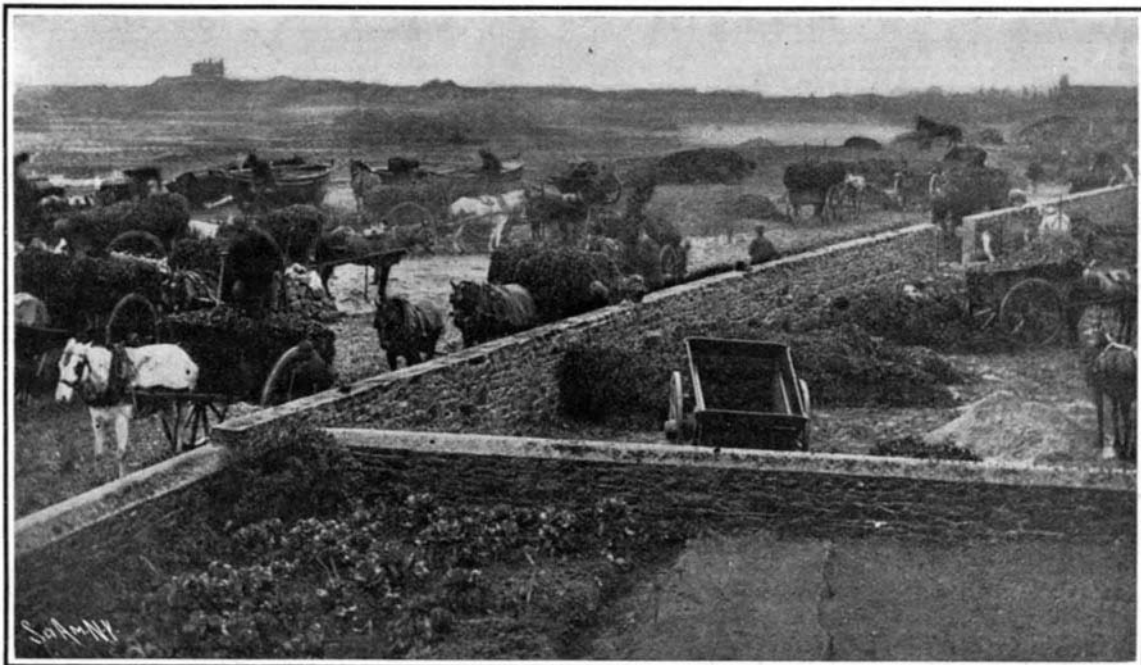
centuries old. The dry seaweed is thrown into the kiln and set on fire. The draft keeps the stuff smoldering away until it is all consumed, leaving a heap of fine white ash in the receiver below.

Along the coasts of Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney, and Sark, lie vast submerged banks of seaweed quite close to the surface. The banks are occasionally a very serious menace to navigation, particularly when enormous masses of the weed are torn free by the storms. Thus, the great liner "Mohican," which foundered off this coast ten or twelve years ago, owed her destruction entirely to vast entangling masses of floating seaweed, which caused her to drift into the breakers in utter helplessness.

At low tide these banks are visited by the seaweed farmers, and great masses are literally reaped from the sunken rocks by means of sickles attached to long poles. The weed is cut off at the roots and floats to the surface. It is brought ashore in lighters in immense quantities. Oddly enough, its price continues to drop, although the local iodine industry grows steadily year by year.

When the weed is used unburned upon the land, it is plowed into the ground in February and March; otherwise the residue of ashes is scattered over the ground immediately after plowing.

The quaintest sight of all connected with the seaweed harvest is the great procession in May at the conclusion of a successful winter's season. Every seaweed cart appears to be present and the sturdy little ponies are all decked with colored ribbons. Quaintly-dressed men, women, and children are seen forming in procession, and bearing picks, sickles, and rakes which have done duty to such good purpose throughout the season.



Carts Loading and Unloading the Seaweed.

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