

Winthrop Mackworth Praed (1802-39)

2 *The Red Fisherman,*
 or the Devil's Decoy

“Oh flesh, flesh, how art thou fishfled!”

Romeo and Juliet.

The abbot arose, and closed his book,
And donned his sandal shoon,
And wandered forth, alone, to look
Upon the summer moon:
A starlight sky was o'er his head, 5
A quiet breeze around;
And the flowers a thrilling fragrance shed,
And the waves a soothing sound:
It was not an hour, nor a scene, for aught
But love and calm delight; 10
Yet the holy man had a cloud of thought
On his wrinkled brow that night.
He gazed on the river that gurgled by,
But he thought not of the reeds:
He clasped his gilded rosary, 15
But he did not tell the beads;
If he looked to the heaven, 'twas not to invoke
The Spirit that dwelleth there;
If he opened his lips, the words they spoke
Had never the tone of prayer. 20
A pious priest might the abbot seem,
He had swayed the crosier well;
But what was the theme of the abbot's dream,
The abbot were loth to tell.

Companionless, for a mile or more, 25
He traced the windings of the shore.
Oh, beauteous is that river still,
As it winds by many a sloping hill,
And many a dim o'erarching grove,
And many a flat and sunny cove, 30

And terraced lawns, whose bright arcades
The honeysuckle sweetly shades,
And rocks, whose very crags seem bowers,
So gay they are with grass and flowers!

But the abbot was thinking of scenery, 35
About as much in sooth,
As a lover thinks of constancy,
Or an advocate of truth.

He did not mark how the skies in wrath
Grew dark above his head; 40

He did not mark how the mossy path
Grew damp beneath his tread;
And nearer he came, and still more near,
To a pool, in whose recess
The water had slept for many a year, 45

Unchanged and motionless;
From the river stream it spread away
The space of half a rood;
The surface had the hue of clay
And the scent of human blood; 50

The trees and the herbs that round it grew
Were venomous and foul;
And the birds that through the bushes flew
Were the vulture and the owl;
The water was as dark and rank 55

As ever a Company pumped;
And the perch, that was netted and laid on the bank,
Grew rotten while it jumped:
And bold was he who thither came
At midnight, man or boy; 60

For the place was cursed with an evil name,
And that name was "The Devil's Decoy!"

The abbot was weary as abbot could be,
And he sat down to rest on the stump of a tree:
When suddenly rose a dismal tone — 65
Was it a song, or was it a moan? —

"O ho! O ho!
Above, below!
Lightly and brightly they glide and go;

The hungry and keen on the top are leaping, 70
The lazy and fat in the depths are sleeping;
Fishing is fine when the pool is muddy,
Broiling is rich when the coals are ruddy!"
In a monstrous fright, by the murky light,
He looked to the left and he looked to the right, 75
And what was the vision close before him,
That flung such a sudden stupor o'er him?
'Twas a sight to make the hair uprise,
And the life-blood colder run:
The startled priest struck both his thighs, 80
And the abbey clock struck one!

All alone, by the side of the pool,
A tall man sat on a three-legged stool,
Kicking his heels on the dewy sod,
And putting in order his reel and rod; 85
Red were the rags his shoulders wore,
And a high red cap on his head he bore;
His arms and his legs were long and bare,
And two or three locks of long red hair
Were tossing about his scraggy neck, 90
Like a tattered flag o'er a splitting wreck.
It might be Time, or it might be trouble,
Had bent that stout back nearly double —
Sunk in their deep and hollow sockets
That blazing couple of Congreve rockets, 95
And shrunk and shrivelled that tawny skin,
Till it hardly covered the bones within.
The line the abbot saw him throw
Had been fashioned and formed long ages ago,
And the hands that worked his foreign vest 100
Long ages ago had gone to their rest:
You would have sworn, as you looked on them,
He had fished in the flood with Ham and Shem!

There was turning of keys, and creaking of locks,
As he took forth a bait from his iron box. 105
Minnow or gentle, worm or fly —
It seemed not such to the abbot's eye;
Gaily it glittered with jewel and gem,

And its shape was the shape of a diadem.
It was fastened a gleaming hook about, 110
By a chain within and a chain without;
The fisherman gave it a kick and a spin,
And the water fizzed as it tumbled in!

From the bowels of the earth,
Strange and varied sounds had birth — 115
Now the battle's bursting peal,
Neigh of steed, and clang of steel;
Now an old man's hollow groan
Echoed from the dungeon stone;
Now the weak and wailing cry 120
Of a stripling's agony!

Cold by this was the midnight air;
But the abbot's blood ran colder,
When he saw a gasping knight lie there,
With a gash beneath his clotted hair, 125
And a hump upon his shoulder.
And the loyal churchman strove in vain
To mutter a Pater Noster;
For he who writhed in mortal pain
Was camped that night on Bosworth plain — 130
The cruel Duke of Gloster!

There was turning of keys, and creaking of locks,
As he took forth a bait from his iron box.
It was a haunch of princely size,
Filling with fragrance earth and skies. 135
The corpulent abbot knew full well
The swelling form, and the steaming smell;
Never a monk that wore a hood
Could better have guessed the very wood
Where the noble hart had stood at bay, 140
Weary and wounded, at close of day.

Sounded then the noisy glee
Of a revelling company —
Sprightly story, wicked jest,
Rated servant, greeted guest, 145

Flow of wine, and flight of cork,
Stroke of knife, and thrust of fork:
But, where'er the board was spread,
Grace, I ween, was never said!

Pulling and tugging the Fisherman sat; 150

And the priest was ready to vomit,
When he hauled out a gentleman, fine and fat,
With a belly as big as a brimming vat,
And a nose as red as a comet.

"A capital stew," the fisherman said, 155
"With cinnamon and sherry!"

And the abbot turned away his head,
For his brother was lying before him dead,
The mayor of St. Edmund's Bury!

There was turning of keys, and creaking of locks, 160
As he took forth a bait from his iron box:

It was a bundle of beautiful things —
A peacock's tail, and a butterfly's wings,
A scarlet slipper, an auburn curl,
A mantle of silk, and a bracelet of pearl, 165
And a packet of letters, from whose sweet fold
Such a stream of delicate odors rolled,
That the abbot fell on his face, and fainted,
And deemed his spirit was half-way sainted.

Sounds seemed dropping from the skies, 170

Stifled whispers, smothered sighs,
And the breath of vernal gales,
And the voice of nightingales:

But the nightingales were mute,
Envious, when an unseen lute 175
Shaped the music of its chords
Into passion's thrilling words:

"Smile, lady, smile! — I will not set
Upon my brow the coronet,
Till thou wilt gather roses white 180
To wear around its gems of light.
Smile, lady, smile! — I will not see

Rivers and Hastings bend the knee,
Till those bewitching lips of thine
Will bid me rise in bliss from mine. 185
Smile, lady, smile! — for who would win
A loveless throne through guilt and sin?
Or who would reign o'er vale and hill,
If woman's heart were rebel still?"

One jerk, and there a lady lay, 190
A lady wondrous fair;
But the rose of her lip had faded away,
And her cheek was as white and as cold as clay,
And torn was her raven hair.
"Ah ha!" said the fisher, in merry guise, 195
"Her gallant was hooked before;"
And the abbot heaved some piteous sighs,
For oft he had blessed those deep blue eyes,
The eyes of Mistress Shore!

There was turning of keys, and creaking of locks, 200
As he took forth a bait from his iron box.
Many the cunning sportsman tried,
Many he flung with a frown aside;
A minstrel's harp, and a miser's chest,
A hermit's cowl, and a baron's crest, 205
Jewels of lustre, robes of price,
Tomes of heresy, loaded dice,
And golden cups of the brightest wine
That ever was pressed from the Burgundy vine;
There was a perfume of sulphur and nitre, 210
As he came at last to a bishop's mitre!
From top to toe the abbot shook,
As the fisherman armed his golden hook;
And awfully were his features wrought
By some dark dream or wakened thought. 215
Look how the fearful felon gazes
On the scaffold his country's vengeance raises,
When the lips are cracked and the jaws are dry
With the thirst which only in death shall die:
Mark the mariner's frenzied frown 220
As the swaling wherry settles down,

When peril has numbed the sense and will,
Though the hand and the foot may struggle still:
Wilder far was the abbot's glance,
Deeper far was the abbot's trance: 225
Fixed as a monument, still as air,
He bent no knee, and he breathed no prayer;
But he signed — he knew not why or how —
The sign of the Cross on his clammy brow.

There was turning of keys, and creaking of locks, 230
As he stalked away with his iron box.
 "O ho! O ho!
 The cock doth crow;
It is time for the fisher to rise and go.
Fair luck to the abbot, fair luck to the shrine! 235
He hath gnawed in twain my choicest line;
Let him swim to the north, let him swim to the south,
The Abbot will carry my hook in his mouth!"

The abbot had preached for many years,
 With as clear articulation 240
As ever was heard in the House of Peers
 Against Emancipation;
His words had made battalions quake,
 Had roused the zeal of martyrs;
Had kept the Court an hour awake, 245
 And the King himself three quarters:
But ever, from that hour, 'tis said,
 He stammered and he stuttered,
As if an axe went through his head
 With every word he uttered. 250
He stuttered o'er blessing, he stuttered o'er ban,
 He stuttered, drunk or dry;
And none but he and the fisherman
 Could tell the reason why!

1827

(From *The Poems of Winthrop Mackworth Praed*.
Revised and Enlarged Edition. With a Memoir by the Rev.
Derwent Coleridge. Vol. 1. New York, 1865)