

CHAPTER III.—THE FISH ARE AS HUNGRY AS HE IS.

To fish at Sker had always been a matter of some risk and conflict; inasmuch as Evan Thomas, who lived in the ancient house there, and kept the rabbit-warren, never could be brought to know that the sea did not belong to him. He had a grant from the manor, he said, and the shore was part of the manor; and whosoever came hankering there was a poacher, a thief, and a robber. With these hard words, and harder blows, he kept off most of the neighbourhood; but I always felt that the lurch of the tide was no more than the heeling of a ship, and therefore any one free of the sea, was free of the ebb and flow of it.

So when he began to reproach me once, I allowed him to swear himself thoroughly out, and then, in a steadfast manner, said, "Black Evan, the shore is not mine or yours. Stand you here and keep it, and I will never come again;" for in three hours' time there would be a fathom of water where we stood. And when he caught me again, I answered, "Evan Black, if you catch me inland, meddling with any of your land-goods, coneys, or hares, or partridges, give me a leathering like a man, and I must put up with it; but dare you touch me on this shore, which belongs to our lord the King, all the way under high-water mark, and by the rod of the Red Sea I will show you the law of it."

He looked at me and the pole I bore, and heavy and strong man as he was, he thought it wiser to speak me fair. "Well, well, Dyo, dear," he said in Welsh, having scarce any English, "You have served the King, Dyo, and are bound to know what is right and wrong; only let me know, good man, if you see any other rogues fishing here.

This I promised him freely enough, because, of course, I had no objection to his forbidding other people, and especially one vile Scotchman. Yet being a man of no liberality, he never could see even me fish there without following and abusing me, and most of all after a market-day.

That tide I had the rarest sport that ever you did see. Scarcely a conger-hole

I tried without the landlord being at home, and biting savagely at the iron, which came (like a rate) upon him; whereupon I had him by the jaw, as the tax-collector has. Scarcely a lobster-shelf I felt, tickling as I do under the weeds, but what a grand old soldier came to the portcullis of his stronghold, and nabbed the neat-hide up my fingers, and stuck thereto till I hauled him out "nolus-woluss," as we say; and there he showed his purple nippers, and his great long whiskers, and then his sides, hooped like a cask, till his knuckled legs fought with the air, and the lobes of his tail were quivering. It was fine to see these fellows, worth at least a shilling, and to pop them into my basket, where they clawed at one another. Glorious luck I had, in truth, and began to forget my troubles, and the long way home again to a lonely cottage, and my fear that little Bunny was passing a sorry day of it. She should have a new pair of boots, and mother Jones a good Sunday dinner; and as for myself, I would think, perhaps, about half a glass of fine old rum (to remind me of the navy), and a pipe of the short-cut Bristol tobacco—but that must depend upon circumstances.

Now circumstances had so much manners (contrary to their custom) that they contrived to keep themselves continually in my favour. Not only did I fetch up and pile a noble heap of oysters and mussels just at the lowest of the ebb, but after that, when the side was flowing, and my work grew brisker—as it took me by the calves, and my feet were not cut by the mussels more than I could walk upon—suddenly I found a thing beating all experience both of the past and future.

This was, that the heat of the weather, and the soft south wind prevailing, had filled the deep salt-water pools among the rocks of Pool Tavan, and as far as Funnon Gwyn, with the finest prawns ever seen or dreamed of; and also had peopled the shallow pools higher up the beach with shoals of silver mullet-fry—small indeed, and as quick as lightning, but well worth a little trouble to catch,