

TWO FISHERS.

(From the French of Guy de Maupassant)

Paris was blockaded—famished—at the point of death. Even the sparrows on the housetops were few and far between, and the very sewers were in danger of becoming depopulated. People ate anything they could get. Monsieur Morisot, watchmaker by trade, was walking early one bright January morning down the Boulevards, his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, feeling depressed, when he unexpectedly ran against a friend. He recognized Monsieur Sauvage, an old-time chum of the river side. Every Sunday before the war Morisot used to start at day break with his bamboo fishing rod in his hand, his tin, bait and tackle box upon his back. He used to take the train to Colombes, and walk from there to the island of Marante. No sooner had he arrived at the river than he used to begin to fish and continue fishing until evening. Here every Sunday he used to meet Monsieur Sauvage, a linen-draper from Paris, but stout and jovial withal, as keen a fisherman moreover as he was himself. Often they would sit side by side, their feet dangling over the water for half a day at a time, and say scarcely a word, yet little by little they became friends. Sometimes they never spoke at all. Occasionally they launched out into conversation, but they understood each other perfectly without its aid, for their tastes and ideas were the same. On a Spring morning in the bright sunshine, when the light and delicate mist hovered over the river, and these two mad fishermen enjoyed a foretaste of real summer weather, Morisot would say to his neighbor.

"Hein! not bad, eh?"

And Sauvage would reply: "I know nothing to beat it."

This interchange of sentiment was quite enough to engender mutual understanding and esteem.

In autumn, towards evening, when the setting sun reddened the sky and cast shadows of the fleeting clouds, over the water, when the river was decked in purple; when the whole horizon was lighted up and the figures of the two friends were illumined as with fire; when the russet-brown of the trees was lightly tinged with gold, and the trees themselves shivered with a wintry shake, Monsieur Sauvage would smile at Monsieur Morisot and say, "What a sight, eh?"

And Monsieur Morisot, without even raising his eyes from his float, would answer, "Better than the Boulevards, hein!"

This morning, as soon as they had recognized each other, they shook hands warmly, quite overcome at meeting again under such different circumstances.

Monsieur Sauvage sighed and murmured, "A nice state of things."

Monsieur Morisot, gloomy and sad, answered, "And what weather! To day is New Year's day."

The sky in fact was clear, bright and beautiful.

They began to walk along, sorrowful and pensive. Said Morisot, "And our fishing, eh? What times we used to have!"

Sauvage replied: "When shall we have them again?"

They went into a little "café" and had a glass of absinthe, and then started again on their walk.

They stopped at another "café" for another glass. When they came again they were slightly dazed, like people who had fasted long and then partaken too freely.

It was lovely weather. A soft breeze fanned their faces. Monsieur Sauvage, upon whom the fresh air was beginning to take effect, suddenly said: "Suppose we were to go."

"Go where?"

"Why, fishing!"

"But where?"

"To our island of course. The French outposts are at Colombes. I know Col. Demoulin; he will let us pass through easily enough."

Morisot trembled with delight at the very idea. "All right, I'm your man."

They separated to fetch their rods.

An hour afterwards they were walking fast along the high road, towards the town commanded by Col. Demoulin. He smiled at their request but granted it, and they went on their way rejoicing in the possession of the password.

Soon they had crossed the lines, passed through deserted Colombes, and found themselves in the vineyard leading down to the river. It was about eleven o'clock.

On the other side the village of Argenteuil seemed as it it were dead. The hills of Egremont and Sammons commanded the whole country round. The great plain stretching out as far as Manterne was empty as air. Nothing in sight but cherry trees, and stretches of grey soil.

Monsieur Sauvage pointed with his finger to the heights above, and said: "The Prussians are up there," and a vague sense of uneasiness seized upon the two friends.

The Prussians! They had never set eyes upon them, but for months past they had felt their presence near, encircling their beloved Paris, ruining their beloved France, pillaging, massacring, insatiable, invincible, invisible, all powerful, and as they thought on them a sort of superstitious terror seemed to mingle with the hate they bore towards their unknown conquerors. Morisot murmured: "Suppose we were to meet them," and Sauvage replied, with the instinctive gallantry of the Parisian, "Well! we would offer them some of our fish for supper."

All the same they hesitated before venturing into the country, intimidated as they were by the all-pervading silence.

Eventually Monsieur Sauvage plucked up courage. "Come along, let's make a start; but we must be cautious."

They went through the vineyard, bent double, crawling along from bush to bush, ears and eyes on the alert.

Only one strip of ground lay between them and the river. They began to run, and when they reached the bank they crouched down among the dry reeds for shelter.

Morisot laid his ear to the ground to listen for the sound of footsteps, but he could hear nothing. They were alone, quite alone; gradually they felt reassured and began to fish.

The deserted island of Marante hid them from the opposite shore. The little restaurant was closed and looked as if it had been neglected for years. Monsieur Sauvage caught the first gudgeon, Monsieur Morisot the second, and every minute they pulled up their lines with a little silver object dangling and struggling on the hook. Truly a miraculous draught of fishes. As the fish were caught they put them in a net which floated in the water at their feet. They positively revelled in the enjoyment of a long forbidden sport. The sun shone warm upon their backs. They heard nothing—they thought of nothing—the rest of the world was as nothing to them. They simply fished.

Suddenly a smothered sound, as it were underground, made the earth tremble. The guns had re-commenced firing. Morisot turned his head, and saw above the bank. Far away to the left the vast shadow of Mount Valerien, and over it the white wreath of smoke from the gun which had just been fired.

Then a jet of flame burst forth from the fortress in answer, a moment later followed by another explosion. Then others, till every second as it seemed the mountain breathed out death, and the white smoke formed a funeral pall above it.

Monsieur Sauvage shrugged his shoulders. "They are beginning again," said he.

Monsieur Morisot anxiously watching his float bob up and down, was suddenly seized with rage against the belligerents and growled out:

"How idiotic to kill one another like that," Monsieur Sauvage.

"It's worse than the brute beasts."

Monsieur Morisot, who had just hooked a bleak, said: "And to think that it will always be thus so long as there are such things as governments."

Monsieur Sauvage stopped him: "The Republic would not have declared war."