

Two Fishers.

FROM THE FRENCH OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

[HENRI RÉNÉ ALBERT GUY DE MAUPASSANT was born on the 5th of August in the year 1850. His parents lived in Normandy, and were people of position ; but when, in 1870, the war broke out with Prussia, Guy, then just twenty, buckled on his sword and served his country as a common soldier. When the war was over, he became acquainted with Gustave Flaubert, and the brilliant author of "Salammbô" introduced him to the world of letters, in which he quickly won himself a foremost place. He is not a very prolific writer, but the quality of his work is always fine, and he is one of the best writers of short tales now living. He is fond of using his experience of the war as a basis for his stories—of which "Two Fishers" is an excellent example, as well as of his remarkably artistic style, which tells a story in its full effect without a word too much or little.]



THE TWO FISHERS.

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 hungry and depressed, when he unexpectedly ran against a friend. He recognised Monsieur Sauvage, an old time chum of the river-side.

Every Sunday before the war Morisot used to start at daybreak 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 to walk from

there to the Island of Maranthe. 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 neighbour: "Hein! not bad, eh?"

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

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

In autumn, toward 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 recognised 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 out 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 Colonel Dumoulin; he will let us pass through easily enough."



"THEY WENT ON THEIR WAY REJOICING."

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 Colonel Dumoulin.

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 if it were dead. The hills of Orgremont and Saumons commanded the whole country round. The great plain stretching out as far as Nanterre 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 upon 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 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 recommenced firing. Morisot turned his head, and saw above the bank, far away to the left, the vast shadow of Mont 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," he said.

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."

Monsieur Morisot in his turn: "With Kings we have foreign wars, with the Republic we have civil wars."

Then in a friendly way they began to discuss politics with the calm common-sense of reasonable and peace-loving men, agreeing on the one point that no one would ever be free. And Mont Valerien thundered unceasingly, demolishing with its cannon-balls French houses, crushing out French lives, ruining many a dream, many a joy, many a hope deferred, wrecking much happiness, and bringing to the hearts of women, girls, and mothers in France and elsewhere, sorrow and suffering which would never have an end.

"It's life," said Monsieur Morisot.

"Say rather that it's death," said Monsieur Sauvage.

They started, scared out of their lives, as they felt that someone was walking close behind them. Turning round, they saw



"TURNING ROUND THEY SAW FOUR MEN."

four men, four tall, bearded men, dressed as servants in livery, and wearing flat caps upon their heads. These men were covering the two fishermen with rifles.

The rods dropped from their frightened hands, and floated aimlessly down the river. In an instant the Frenchmen were seized, bound, thrown into a boat, and ferried over to the island.

Behind the house they had thought uninhabited was a picket of Prussian soldiers. A hairy giant, who was sitting astride a chair, and smoking a porcelain pipe, asked them in excellent French if they had had good sport.

A soldier placed at the feet of the officer the net full of fish, which he had brought away with him.

"Not bad, I see. But we have other fish to fry. Listen, and don't alarm yourselves. You are a couple of French spies sent out to watch my movements, disguised as fishermen. I take you prisoners, and I order you to be shot. You have fallen into my hands—so much the worse for you. It is the fortune of war. Inasmuch, however, as you came through the lines you are certainly in possession of the password. Otherwise you could not get back again. Give me the word and I will let you go."

The two friends, livid with fear, stood side by side, their hands nervously twitching, but they answered not a word.

The officer continued: "No one need ever know it. You will go home quietly, and your secret will go with you. If you refuse it is death for you both, and that instantly. Take your choice."

They neither spoke nor moved.

The Prussian calmly pointed to the river and said: "Reflect, in five minutes you will be at the bottom of that water. I suppose you have families."

Mont Valerien thundered unceasingly.

The two Frenchmen stood perfectly still and silent.

The officer gave an order in German. Then he moved his chair farther away from the prisoners, and a dozen soldiers drew up in line twenty paces off.

"I will give you one minute," he said, "not one second more."

He got up leisurely, and approached the two Frenchmen. He took Morisot by the arm and said, in an undertone: "Quick! Give me the word. Your friend will know nothing. I will appear to give way."

Monsieur Morisot did not answer.

The Prussian took Monsieur Sauvage aside and said the same thing to him.

Monsieur Sauvage did not answer.

They found themselves once more side by side.

The officer gave another order; the soldiers raised their guns.

By accident Morisot's glance fell upon

the net full of fish on the ground a few steps off. A ray of sunshine lit up their glittering bodies, and a sudden weakness came over him. "Good-bye, Monsieur Sauvage," he whispered.

"Good-bye, Monsieur Morisot," replied Monsieur Sauvage. They pressed each other's hands, trembling from head to foot.

"Fire," said the officer.

Monsieur Sauvage fell dead on his face. Monsieur Morisot, of stronger build, staggered, stumbled, and then fell right across the body of his friend, with his face turned upwards to the sky, his breast riddled with balls.

The Prussian gave another order. His men dispersed for a moment, returning with cords and stones. They tied the stones to the feet of the dead Frenchmen, and carried them down to the river.

Mont Valerien thundered unceasingly.

Two soldiers took Morisot by the head and feet. Two others did the same to Sauvage. The bodies swung to and fro, were launched into space, described a curve, and plunged feet first into the river.

The water bubbled, boiled, then calmed down, and the little wavelets, tinged with red, circled gently towards the bank.

The officer, impassive as ever, said, "It is the fishes' turn now."

His eye fell upon the gudgeon lying on the grass. He picked them up, and called out, "Wilhelm." A soldier in a white cap appeared. He threw the fish towards him.

"Fry these little animals for me at once, while they are still alive and kicking. They will be delicious."

Then he began smoking again.

