

The Fishermen

From the French of
Emile Verhaeren

By Alma Strettell

THE spot is flaked with mist, that fills,
Thickening into rolls more dank,
The thresholds and the window-sills,
And smokes on every bank.

The river stagnates, pestilent
With carrion by the current sent
This way and that—and yonder lies
The moon, just like a woman dead,
That they have smothered overhead,
Deep in the skies.

In a few boats alone there gleam
Lamps that light up and magnify
The backs, bent over stubbornly,
Of the old fishers of the stream,
Who since last evening, steadily,
—For God knows what night-fishery—

Have

The Fishermen

Have let their black nets downward slow
 Into the silent water go,
 The noisome water there below.

Down in the river's deeps, ill-fate
 And black mischances breed and hatch,
 Unseen of them, and lie in wait
 As for their prey. And these they catch
 With weary toil—believing still
 That simple, honest work is best—
 At night, beneath the shifting mist
 Unkind and chill.

So hard and harsh, yon clock-towers tell,
 With muffled hammers, like a knell,
 The midnight hour.
 From tower to tower
 So hard and harsh the midnights chime,
 The midnights harsh of autumn time,
 The weary midnights bell.

The crew
 Of fishers black have on their back
 Nought save a nameless rag or two ;
 And their old hats distil withal,
 And drop by drop let crumbling fall
 Into their necks, the mist-flakes all.

The hamlets and their wretched huts
 Are numb and drowsy, and all round
 The willows too, and walnut trees,
 'Gainst which the Easterly fierce breeze
 Has waged its feud.

No bayings from the forest sound,
No cry the empty midnight cuts—
The midnight space that grows imbrued
With damp breaths from the ashy ground.

The fishers hail each other not—
Nor help—in their fraternal lot ;
Doing but that which must be done,
Each fishes for himself alone.
And this one gathers in his net,
 Drawing it tighter yet,
His freight of petty misery ;
And that one drags up recklessly

Diseases from their slimy bed ;
While others still their meshes spread
Out to the sorrows that drift by
 Threateningly nigh ;
And the last hauls aboard with force
The wreckage dark of his remorse.

The river, round its corners bending,
And with the dyke-heads intertwined,
Goes hence—since what times out of mind ?
Toward the far horizon wending
 Of weariness unending.
Upon the banks, the skins of wet
Black ooze-heaps nightly poison sweat,
And the mists are their fleeces light
That curl up to the houses' height.

The Fishermen

In their dark boats, where nothing stirs,
Not even the red-flamed torch that blurs
With halos huge, as if of blood,
The thick felt of the mist's white hood,
Death with his silence seals the sere
Old fishermen of madness here.

The isolated, they abide
Deep in the mist—still side by side,
But seeing one another never ;
Weary are both their arms—and yet
Their work their ruin doth beget.

Each for himself works desperately,
Knowing not what, without a thought,
Nor dreams nor schemes has he ;
Long have they worked, for long, long years,
While every instant brings its fears ;
Nor have they ever
Quitted the borders of their river,
Where 'mid the moonlit mists, they strain
To fish misfortune up amain.

If but in this their night they hailed each other,
And brothers' voices might console a brother !

But numb and sullen, on they go,
With heavy brows and backs bent low,
While their small lights beside them gleam,
Flickering feebly on the stream.

Like

Like blocks of shadow they are there,
Nor ever do their eyes divine
That far away beyond the mists
Acrid and spongy—there exists
A firmament where 'mid the night,
Attractive as a loadstone, bright
Prodigious planets shine.

The fishers black of that black plague
Are the immensely lost, among
The knells, the far-off distance vague,
The great beyond stretched out so long,
Further than any eye can see ;
And the damp autumn midnight rains
Into their souls' monotony.