

## 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.



## 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.