

On the River

Guy de Maupassant

I rented a little country house last summer on the banks of the Seine, several leagues from Paris, and went out there to sleep every evening. After a few days I made the acquaintance of one of my neighbors, a man between thirty and forty, who certainly was the most curious specimen I ever met. He was an old boating man, and crazy about boating. He was always beside the water, on the water, or in the water. He must have been born in a boat, and he will certainly die in a boat at the last.

One evening as we were walking along the banks of the Seine I asked him to tell me some stories about his life on the water. The good man at once became animated, his whole expression changed, he became eloquent, almost poetical. There was in his heart one great passion, an absorbing, irresistible passion--the river.

Ah, he said to me, how many memories I have, connected with that river that you see flowing beside us! You people who live in streets know nothing about the river. But listen to a fisherman as he mentions the word. To him it is a mysterious thing, profound, unknown, a land of mirages and phantasmagoria, where one sees by night things that do not exist, hears sounds that one does not recognize, trembles without knowing why, as in passing through a cemetery--and it is, in fact, the most sinister of cemeteries, one in which one has no tomb.

The land seems limited to the river boatman, and on dark nights, when there is no moon, the river seems limitless. A sailor has not the same feeling for the sea. It is often remorseless and cruel, it is true; but it shrieks, it roars, it is honest, the great sea; while the river is silent and perfidious. It does not speak, it flows along without a sound; and this eternal motion of flowing water is more terrible to me than the high waves of the ocean.

Dreamers maintain that the sea hides in its bosom vast tracts of blue where those who are drowned roam among the big fishes, amid strange forests and crystal grottoes. The river has only black depths where one rots in the slime. It is beautiful, however, when it sparkles in the light of the rising sun and gently laps its banks covered with whispering reeds.

The poet says, speaking of the ocean,

O waves, what mournful tragedies ye know--
Deep waves, the dread of kneeling mothers' hearts!
Ye tell them to each other as ye roll
On flowing tide, and this it is that gives
The sad despairing tones unto your voice
As on ye roll at eve by mounting tide."

Well, I think that the stories whispered by the slender reeds, with their little soft voices, must be more sinister than the lugubrious tragedies told by the roaring of the waves.

But as you have asked for some of my recollections, I will tell you of a singular adventure that happened to me ten years ago.

I was living, as I am now, in Mother Lafon's house, and one of my closest friends, Louis Bernet who has now given up boating, his low shoes and his bare neck, to go into the Supreme Court, was living in the village of C., two leagues further down the river. We dined together every day, sometimes at his house, sometimes at mine.

One evening as I was coming home along and was pretty tired, rowing with difficulty my big boat, a twelve-footer, which I always took out at night, I stopped a few moments to draw breath near the reed-covered point yonder, about two hundred metres from the railway bridge.

It was a magnificent night, the moon shone brightly, the river gleamed, the air was calm and soft. This peacefulness tempted me. I thought to myself that it would be pleasant to smoke a pipe in this spot. I took up my anchor and cast it into the river.

The boat floated downstream with the current, to the end of the chain, and then stopped, and I seated myself in the stern on my sheepskin and made myself as comfortable as possible. There was not a sound to be heard, except that I occasionally thought I could perceive an almost imperceptible lapping of the water against the bank, and I noticed taller groups of reeds which assumed strange shapes and seemed, at times, to move.

The river was perfectly calm, but I felt myself affected by the unusual silence that surrounded me. All the creatures, frogs and toads, those nocturnal singers of the marsh, were silent.

Suddenly a frog croaked to my right, and close beside me. I shuddered. It ceased, and I heard nothing more, and resolved to smoke, to soothe my mind. But, although I was a noted colorer of pipes, I could not smoke; at the second draw I was nauseated, and gave up trying. I began to sing. The sound of my voice was distressing to me. So I lay still, but presently the slight motion of the boat disturbed me. It seemed to me as if she were making huge lurches, from bank to bank of the river, touching each bank alternately. Then I felt as though an invisible force, or being, were drawing her to the surface of the water and lifting her out, to let her fall again. I was tossed about as in a tempest. I heard noises around me. I sprang to my feet with a single bound. The water was glistening, all was calm.

I saw that my nerves were somewhat shaky, and I resolved to leave the spot. I pulled the anchor chain, the boat began to move; then I felt a resistance. I pulled harder, the anchor did not come up; it had caught on something at the bottom of the river and I could not raise it. I began pulling again, but all in vain. Then, with my oars, I turned the boat with its head up stream to change the position of the anchor. It was no use, it was still caught. I flew into a rage and shook the chain furiously. Nothing budged. I sat down, disheartened, and began to reflect on my situation. I could not dream of breaking this chain, or detaching it from the boat, for it was massive and was riveted at the bows to a piece of wood as thick as my arm. However, as the weather was so fine I thought that it probably would not be long before some fisherman came to my aid. My ill-luck had quieted me. I sat down and was able, at length, to smoke my pipe. I had a bottle of rum; I drank two or three glasses, and was able to laugh at the situation. It was very warm; so that, if need be, I could sleep out under the stars without any great harm.

All at once there was a little knock at the side of the boat. I gave a start, and a cold sweat

broke out all over me. The noise was, doubtless, caused by some piece of wood borne along by the current, but that was enough, and I again became a prey to a strange nervous agitation. I seized the chain and tensed my muscles in a desperate effort. The anchor held firm. I sat down again, exhausted.

The river had slowly become enveloped in a thick white fog which lay close to the water, so that when I stood up I could see neither the river, nor my feet, nor my boat; but could perceive only the tops of the reeds, and farther off in the distance the plain, lying white in the moonlight, with big black patches rising up from it towards the sky, which were formed by groups of Italian poplars. I was as if buried to the waist in a cloud of cotton of singular whiteness, and all sorts of strange fancies came into my mind. I thought that someone was trying to climb into my boat which I could no longer distinguish, and that the river, hidden by the thick fog, was full of strange creatures which were swimming all around me. I felt horribly uncomfortable, my forehead felt as if it had a tight band round it, my heart beat so that it almost suffocated me, and, almost beside myself, I thought of swimming away from the place. But then, again, the very idea made me tremble with fear. I saw myself, lost, going by guesswork in this heavy fog, struggling about amid the grasses and reeds which I could not escape, my breath rattling with fear, neither seeing the bank, nor finding my boat; and it seemed as if I would feel myself dragged down by the feet to the bottom of these black waters.

In fact, as I should have had to ascend the stream at least five hundred metres before finding a spot free from grasses and rushes where I could land, there were nine chances to one that I could not find my way in the fog and that I should drown, no matter how well I could swim.

I tried to reason with myself. My will made me resolve not to be afraid, but there was something in me besides my will, and that other thing was afraid. I asked myself what there was to be afraid of. My brave "ego" ridiculed my coward "ego," and never did I realize, as on that day, the existence in us of two rival personalities, one desiring a thing, the other resisting, and each winning the day in turn.

This stupid, inexplicable fear increased, and became terror. I remained motionless, my eyes staring, my ears on the stretch with expectation. Of what? I did not know, but it must be something terrible. I believe if it had occurred to a fish to jump out of the water, as often happens, nothing more would have been required to make me fall over, stiff and unconscious.

However, by a violent effort I succeeded in becoming almost rational again. I took up my bottle of rum and took several pulls. Then an idea came to me, and I began to shout with all my might towards all the points of the compass in succession. When my throat was absolutely paralyzed I listened. A dog was howling, at a great distance.

I drank some more rum and stretched myself out at the bottom of the boat. I remained there about an hour, perhaps two, not sleeping, my eyes wide open, with nightmares all about me. I did not dare to rise, and yet I intensely longed to do so. I delayed it from moment to moment. I said to myself: "Come, get up!" and I was afraid to move. At last I raised myself with infinite caution as though my life depended on the slightest sound that I might make; and looked over the edge of the boat. I was dazzled by the most marvellous, the most astonishing sight that it is possible to see. It was one of those phantasmagoria of fairyland,

one of those sights described by travellers on their return from distant lands, whom we listen to without believing.

The fog which, two hours before, had floated on the water, had gradually cleared off and massed on the banks, leaving the river absolutely clear; while it formed on either bank an uninterrupted wall six or seven metres high, which shone in the moonlight with the dazzling brilliance of snow. One saw nothing but the river gleaming with light between these two white mountains; and high above my head sailed the great full moon, in the midst of a bluish, milky sky.

All the creatures in the water were awake. The frogs croaked furiously, while every few moments I heard, first to the right and then to the left, the abrupt, monotonous and mournful metallic note of the bullfrogs. Strange to say, I was no longer afraid. I was in the midst of such an unusual landscape that the most remarkable things would not have astonished me.

How long this lasted I do not know, for I ended by falling asleep. When I opened my eyes the moon had gone down and the sky was full of clouds. The water lapped mournfully, the wind was blowing, it was pitch dark. I drank the rest of the rum, then listened, while I trembled, to the rustling of the reeds and the foreboding sound of the river. I tried to see, but could not distinguish my boat, nor even my hands, which I held up close to my eyes.

Little by little, however, the blackness became less intense. All at once I thought I noticed a shadow gliding past, quite near me. I shouted, a voice replied; it was a fisherman. I called him; he came near and I told him of my ill-luck. He rowed his boat alongside of mine and, together, we pulled at the anchor chain. The anchor did not move. Day came, gloomy gray, rainy and cold, one of those days that bring one sorrows and misfortunes. I saw another boat. We hailed it. The man on board of her joined his efforts to ours, and gradually the anchor yielded. It rose, but slowly, slowly, loaded down by a considerable weight. At length we perceived a black mass and we drew it on board. It was the corpse of an old woman with a big stone round her neck.