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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO FISHERS, AND OTHER POEMS ***

TWO FISHERS

[Pg 1]

*We are the music-makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers
And sitting by desolate streams.*
ARTHUR W. E. O'SHAUGHNESSY.

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TWO FISHERS

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and Other Poems

BY

HERBERT E. PALMER

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET

1918

Dedicated

[Pg 4]

TO THREE FRIENDS

CAPTAIN L. W. CHARLEY

H. T. P.

AND

TWO FISHERS

[Pg 5]

When the War is over, Charley,
We'll go fishing once again.
You'll be a new man, Charley,
When you walk with fishermen.
For we'll seek a leaping river
I know far among the fells;
You'll forget the War there, Charley,
Where the springing water wells.

It's God's own land for the nimble trout,
And ferns and waving flowers,
The bracken and the bilberry,
And the ash the coral dowers.
There are rolling leagues of heather,
Lone hills where the plovers call.
Oh, we'll climb those hills together
Ere the last dews fall!

And we'll talk to the wild creatures
In the crannies of the moors;
Oh, our hearts will mount to Heaven
When the merry lark soars!
All our days will shine with gladness,
All our nights with calm repose.
And we'll throw a fly together
Where the rushing stream flows.

[Pg 6]

Nature has been to me lately
As a fair and radiant bride,
She has drawn me with strange gentleness
To the hollow of her side.
She has gone forth like a warrior
With pricking glaive and spear,
And Grief has quailed in his ambush
When her flashing arms drew near.

I never loved sweet England
Till she kissed me in the West,
The sun upon her shining brows
And the purple on her breast,
Breathing songs of low compassion
To my spirit as it cried,
When I mourned that sinning country
Which had thrust me from her side.

All the wooded hills of the Eifel,
All the vine-bergs of the Rhine,
All the glimmering strands of the Baltic,
All the Brocken black with pine,
Hold no tenderness of Beauty,
(Beauty in the spirit dwells,
Such as smiles from one sweet valley
Darkling 'mid the Western fells.

* * * *

Do you remember, old fellow,
When we fished near Altenahr,
Where the red wine was flowing
And the bowl flashed a star?
Do you remember the big schutzmann,
With his sword by his side,
Who guessed that you were poaching,
And scared you off to hide?

[Pg 7]

Oh, if he'd only known, Charley,
When you sought the bridge's cover
That you'd join the British Army

And go killing of his brother,
He'd have searched bank and vineyard
For a poacher of such worth,
And put you in a prison cell
To cool your summer's mirth.

And do you remember the old inn
With the blue saint above the door,^[1]—
Simon Peter, who looked longingly
Upon our speckled store?—
He who loves all careless fishers
Of the river and the sea,
And prays that God shall save them
With his mates of Galilee.

And what a wild night we had
When we rode home again!
For the students were all dancing
And singing in the train;
And a tall man twanged a banjo
Till he fairly gave us fits;
And a porter ran up swearing,
And the banjo flew to bits.

[Pg 8]

We were all drunk as blazes,
Full of wine to burst.
But, by the sober lads of England,
Those Germans were the worst.
They were singing and dancing,
And shouting with delight;
And the carriage rocked with laughter
As we rushed into the night.

They are all dead now, Charley;
They were merry fellows then.
They are dust and scattered ashes
Washed by the rain.
They are crying in the darkness
Where a grayer planet spins.
But the Lord is kind to fishers
And has spared us in our sins.

Oh, the Lord is kind to fishers
Of the river and the sea
For the sake of Simon Peter
And the lads of Galilee!
For the sake of Simon Peter,
Who so gladly would us shrive,
We are walking in the sunlight,
We are breathing and alive.

And when the War is over
We'll fish awhile together,
We'll climb the Western mountains,
And walk the Western heather,
And the curlew and the wild grouse
Will wake the vales with crying,
And their soft rushing pinions
Will tremble by us, sighing.

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All the dead shepherds
Will hear them in their rest.
But you mustn't heed dead shepherds
When you're fishing in the West;
You mustn't heed the lonely men
Who neither sing nor dance,
There'll be always ghosts there, Charley,
When the wind beats up from France.

It's the holy peace and quiet
Breathing from the Western skies
Which bring the stricken soul its rest
And still the heart's wild cries.
If I hadn't turned for healing

Where the moor to Heaven swells,
I'd have been a dead man, listening
To the mourning of the bells.

If God hadn't sent me healing
Where the mountain bares her breast,
I'd have gone wild and crazy
With the things that I'm oppressed.
All my mad, merry comrades
Of drink, and fight, and lust,
Are trodden into bloody clay
And blowing with the dust.

[Pg 10]

Some marched away with Hindenburg,
And some with General Kluck,
One under Austria's banners
With the devil's cards for luck.
All my dreams went with them,
All the dreams my land denied;
But they're smoke and drifting wreckage now
On the War's wild tide.

It was years since I left England,—
Almost singing to depart,—
She had cast a net about me,
And thrust a dagger in my heart.
But another country smiled to me
And made me quiet nooks,
Where men crushed for me the grapes of joy,
And talked to me of books.

She was a kind land to me once, Charley,
I had real joy in her once;
Her folk loved Shakespeare and Byron,
Shunned no dreamer for a dunce.
They sang old folk songs, noble opera;
Read Anglo-Saxon, old quaint sweets;
And there were no starved souls in her temples,
And no begging men in her streets.

But a hand ever cut my Heaven
With the sharpness of a sword,
There was the very riot of gladness,
Reckless squander of Joy's hoard;
Lechery and sad Corruption
Danced in clinging robes of Light;
Beauty smiled in the arms of Terror
And diced with the minions of Night.

[Pg 11]

And you sprang to England's banner, comrade,
With glad praises on your lips,
To the song of her sabres ringing
And the thunder of her ships.
But a sword broods in the darkness
Whose sweep is the wind's sway,
And the dumb white ships of Heaven
Bear dimly Earth's glory away.

The still white ships of Heaven
Steal out beneath the stars;
And the grieving, sorrowing sailors
Are the dead men of the wars.
They reckon not of the chilly seas
That wildly round them churn.
And the dusk scatters before the prows,
And the leaping waters burn.

The pirate fleets of Heaven
Sweep forth into the night,
Laden with spoils of the living,
Their jewels of delight,
Their topazes and rubies,
The bawds that gave them pleasure;
And the sad thieves reef the swelling sails,
And steal from Earth her treasure.

[Pg 12]

And the night hangs heavy on you, comrade,
And the bitter War goes on.
You are parched for Heaven's starlight
And her soft, refreshing sun.
Joy runs with a passion of swiftness
On the gray feet of the wind.
The doors of darkness tremble;
Then swing back blind.

But you'll be a new man, one day,
Where the west wind thrills.
You'll walk with your olden vigour
Where Heaven clasps the great lone hills.
And the evening sun will squander
Soft lustre of red wine,
And we'll drink the ripest vintage
Where the sun and stars shine.

For the Lord is kind to fishers
Of the river and the sea,
For the sake of Simon Peter
And the lads of Galilee;
For the sake of Simon Peter,
Who so lightly would us shrive,
We will drink the wine of Heaven
And give praise we are alive.

All our days will shine with gladness,
All our nights with rich repose;
Laughter will breathe from our spirits
Like the sweet scent from the rose.
And Joy in glittering armour
Will go forth as with a sword,
When we climb the fells together
To the glory of the Lord.

[Pg 13]

Sweet sounds will rise from the moorland,
And bird and bee awake.
Beauty will break and blossom
For each stricken soldier's sake.
Oh, your heart will leap with joy, Charley,
And your spirit know rest,
When we fish a little river
I've heard singing in the West!

ALTENAHR, 1915

Above the crooked roofs the clouds go sailing;
And near the stream, where once I fished for grayling,
The crusty oberkelner stands and scolds.

My rod still hangs upon three nails a-row,
Just where I placed it, if they've left it so,
I'd like to take one little peep and know.

And every time the landlord looks that way
He thinks of me; and will for many a day.
I helped to break up Germany, he'll say.

[Pg 14]

The little fishes flick their tails, and rise;
They fear no English feathers in their flies.
And I am back in Yorkshire, growing wise.

THE SOLDIERS

As the soldiers march along
All the air is filled with song.
As the soldiers charge with cheers

All the air is drenched with tears.
And when they take their ease at night
The cypress-trees are clothed in white.

GREIFSWALD, 1909

I was sick with pain, once,
Sick with pain.
And an old witch drew to my side
And healed me again.

She was withered, and wretched, and gray,
Deep stabbed with years.
And the skin of her face was scarred
With hate and tears.

She had lived fierce days in that town
The sea-winds flog.
Hourly the neighbours jibed,
Cast stones at a dog.

[Pg 15]

They had slandered her, tricked her; robbed her
Of honour and purse.
But her wrongs slept deep in her heart
For the fiends to nurse.

One went blind; another stark mad,—
He's dead.
Fruit of the curse she flung.
"Old witch," they said.

Life ran high there; men nourished their hates
And slashed with swords.
Harsh skies swerved to the rim of the bay,—
Sweden seawards.

And I lay in her bare, clean room
At the stairway's end.
And the fierce pain clutched me and held me;
And nought would fend.

"O mother," I cried—and she leaned to me—
"Give me your hand's touch.
They have broken me too, and flung me
This same blind crutch."

And she placed her hand in my hand;
And her touch thrilled me.
And the blood ran warm in my veins;
And her dead life healed me.

[Pg 16]

She was wasted, arid as one
Whom no sun cheers.
But her dead life flowered that day
Down sixty years.

THE PUPIL: RHINELAND

"Mister, I do not like the task.
'Tis dull to-day, you're tired, too.
But, Mister, I've a thing to ask;—
Am I not beautiful? Speak true."

Now, God save all poor tutor-men
From Innocence so rapt and sly,
And send the plainest student-girls
To one so passion-starved as I.

She sat within my student's room

In the twilight hour when the shadows stir;
Red lights of sunset swirled the gloom
And rested, glimmering, on her hair.

Coil upon coil it wreathed her crown
In a crushing aureole of flame.
And her brows of alabaster shone
As pure as Mary's of Bethlehem.

Her eyes,—I never knew their hue—
Drowsed, smouldering, in the burning dusk.
And somewhere out of the earth's view
A planet sang, and the air breathed musk.

[Pg 17]

THE BUSHRANGERS

As I was walking down Oxford Street
Ten fierce soldiers I chanced to meet,
They wore big slouch hats with khaki sashes,
And talked like the angry guns, in flashes.

And my friend said to me, "They come from Australia;
Villainous fellows for War's regalia.
John Briton keeps a tobacconist's shed
And twice they have held a gun at his head."

Well, I would have given all I had
To have gone with the bunch of them, good or bad,
To have heard the wickedest say, "Old fellow!"
And staunched his wounds where the black guns bellow.
I'd have thought it a merry thing to die
With such stalwart comrades standing by.

One of them had round eyes like coals—
True parson's quarry when he hunts souls.
The brawniest made my heart turn queer;
The devil in hell would have shunned his leer.
And the tallest and thinnest bore visible traces
Of his banished grandsire's vanished graces.

[Pg 18]

But all the lot of that swaggering ten
Were terrible, fine, strong soldier-men;
And I fairly sobbed at the four cross ways
As my triumphing soul sang England's praise.

O! all the Germans in Berlin town
Couldn't put those ten Australians down.

THE NEW BEGINNING

They had fought the last desperate battle.
They had deluged the earth with their rage
And the crimson flood mounted to Heaven,
And drew up each soul from its grave.

And sent them foeman with foeman
To shatter the quiet of the skies.
And lo! they commingled together
With the hope of God in their eyes.

And in faith they went peacefully singing,
And waking dead stars to new birth,
Till Earth knew Heaven as her lover,
And Heaven leaned down gracious to Earth,

And tendered her blossoms of healing,
And rained on her kindness of tears,
And gave back in trust to her lover
The bloom of the sacrificed years.

[Pg 19]

A GAME OF CHESS

We ranged the chessmen on the chequered deal.
And then I said, "To make the game more real
We'll play the Great War. I'll be Germany;
For you, I guess, the Goth would never be."

And thus it came that I chose black—he, white.
He on Truth's side; I clothed myself with night.
And, crying for a sign unto the Lord,
We cramped all Europe in a foot-square board.

We were two Causes—I, who did detest
That Wrong should triumph, though it were in jest,
Played with soul-sinews cracking, played with zest;
And, every heart-cell beating battle's drum,
I struck with Queen and pawns for Belgium.

I've never played as on that fateful night,
I fairly lost my temper in the fight,
Queens left their thrones; pawns, castles strewed the table,
There never were two causes so unstable.

And then when he'd six pieces, and I eight,
Half of them pawns, he pulled the noose of fate;
And with a knight, a castle—unawares,—
A bishop in a corner breathing prayers,
He caught me tripping. "Checkmate! Smashed!" he said,
And like a beaten Hun I stole to bed.

[Pg 20]

SNOW

My heart delights in poet's minstrelsie,
In pictures ranged down some long gallerie,
In mandolins and all sweet melodie.

And yet, when I go walking through the woods
On frosty days, and watch the falling snow,
I would renounce all Culture's radiant moods
To live in ice-lands with the Eskimo.

How purely gleams the mantle of the snow!
How softly sing the myriad silver tongues
Of whirling flakes that wrought Earth's overthrow!

With the keen air I fill my tired lungs,
And shout for joy and dance for very mirth
Because all Heaven has fallen down to Earth.
And in this mood I'd save my soul, and so
Through pure clean ways right into Heaven go.

AIR RAID

[Pg 21]

I wonder if they'll come to-night!
The round moon rolls in silvery light,
No sound throbs on the windless air.

For, though I tremble to confess,
I never feel more cheerfulness
Than when the German raiders fly
Like bees across the cloudless sky.
And neither pity, pain, nor terror
Will ever wean me from my error.

For oh, to hear the mad guns go,

And watch the starry night aglow
With radiance of crackling fires
And the white searchlight's quivering spires!
For sure, such splendour doth assuage
The very cannon of its rage!

My neighbour plays a violin,
Shredding sweet silver down the din
And songs for fears to dwindle in.

But the houses shake; and the dogs wake.
They growl, they bark for warrior joy,
And seek the airmen to annoy.

Up go their tails into the air,
They gnash their teeth, and their eyes glare.
But on those cruel raiders sail,
Regardless of each quivering tail.

And one gun has a booming note,
Another has a cold in throat;
And some are mellow, and some hoarse,
And some sound sobbing with remorse;
Quite four or five ring musical,
And others very keen to kill.

[Pg 22]

You'd say that twenty champagne corks
Were popping in the London walks.
You'd say that drunken men in scores
Were smashing glass and slamming doors.
You'd say a twanging banjo string
Had snapped in twain with hammering.
You'd say that wild orchestral fellows
Were banging God's Throne with their cellos.
A wail, a crash, like steel trays falling,
And a wind upon the Common—calling.

And over us a sound of humming
—Of hornets or bad bees a-bumming!
A devilish, strident, hoarse, discordant
Whirring of dark fliers mordant.
My soul stands still and sweats with fear.

But the Heavenly stars, all shimmering,
Dance in a giddy whirl and sing.
And other stars, of the Earth, shake sheer
From the mouths of the black guns thundering.

'Tis like some ruining harmony
I heard in Berlin on the Spree
The day they played the Valkyrie.

[Pg 23]

Kind Heaven will comfort my wracked wits
Before I'm blown to little bits.

SICKNESS IN WINTER

Once as I on sick-bed lay
I woke crying for my mother.
But she was eight hundred miles away,
Leagues and leagues of sea between,
And the land all frozen hard and gray.

She was so very old, I ween
She could not have moved a mile that day;
For the land was frozen stiff and gray,
And the menacing seas rolled all between.

NATURE IN WAR-TIME

If flowers could speak
And leaves and plants knew words,
In what strange phrase of chiding would they seek
To tell their anger at this clash of swords!

The blossom that was made for joy and praise,
High bending grasses, and the trees so tall
Tremble for terror in the forest ways.
I see them shake and shake, as live men fall.

Shrapnel crushes them in its fierce caress;
The black guns chant a pæan of their skill.
But little recks the world in its distress
The sorrow that is silent on the hill.

[Pg 24]

COURAGE

I

I'd once a friend—what joy to say!—
Who when he took a holiday
Would climb the towering Dolomites
And strive with Fear upon the heights;
Tied to a rope, down dangling sheer,
He'd talk to God through clouds of Fear.

O give me friends like that, I say,
And such a gallant holiday.

II

I'd another friend, in another pale,
Who spent a holiday in jail.
He fought for what his heart deemed right,
And they shut him up in walls of night.
Yet merrily his heart did sing
Like a mating bird that hails the Spring.

AUNT ZILLAH SPEAKS

[Pg 25]

I never look upon the sea
And hear its waves sighing,
But I must hie me home again
To still my heart's wild crying.
All my years like drowned sailors,
All my days that used to be,
Seem drifting in the silver spray
And mourning by the sea.

But when I take a holiday
I go where flowers are growing,
Where thrushes sing and skylarks wing
And happy streams are flowing;
And the great hills clothed with bracken,
As far as I would flee,
Fling their towering crests to the stars on high
To hide me from the sea.

TALKING TO GOD

A fighting man lay down for ease
In the shade of two tall forest trees
Deep dented with bullet and shell.

And one tree said to the other,

"Is not this worn soldier our brother!
And has he not vowed to defend
This strip of green glade till the End!
Let us thank the kind Father in Heaven
For this kinship of man He has given."

[Pg 26]

The trees talked to God all the night,
And they thrilled with a soaring delight.

SACRIFICE

When Jesus was crucified
The German roamed in his forests,
And the blood of the Frenchman surged in the veins
Of the Roman who pierced His side.
And we, the British, we were not,—
Though a dream that He cherished.
And for each and all Christ died.

PROPHECY

When the cruel War is over
The Earth will sing like a lover;
And grasses, flowers, and trees
Will shake with joy in the breeze.
Very old weary men
Will know their youth again.
And be blithe as England's soldiers when
They first sailed o'er the seas.

And Wisdom lately spent
Will steal forth from banishment,
All betimes in the morning,
Like a bride to her adorning,
Gay and very wistful,
Singing with her heart full,
She will hide her forehead's scars
With the fairest of Heaven's stars.

[Pg 27]

And the tongue will leap with the brain,
And not clank in a forger's chain,
As it has been heretofore
With Truth's jailer at the door;
As it was on this globe prison
Ere the soul of man had risen.

And the dead in the morning dim
Will reign as the seraphim.
They will fan to flame man's spirit
To a whiter purer merit.
There will be a new beginning,
And some shall cease from sinning,—
When the bitter strife is over,
And the Earth is Heaven's lover.

TALKING WATER

Last night I walked in the fern lands
And heard the words of the brooks.
What need has a weary man's spirit
With phrases from books!

The timid fish splashed in the shallows,
The sad wind sobbed in the reeds;
And I soothed with the whispering water
A wound that bleeds.

[Pg 28]

THE END

A poet lay dead where two red frontiers meet;
And many birds fluttered about his feet.
He had unfurled his last wild madrigal,
And winds had borne it where the dead leaves fall.

The thrush, May's mottled elf, the minstrel, sang
More harsh than was his wont. The blackbird rang
Strange sobbing woodland bells. The finch so sweet
Lay with glazed eye, and raised each shattered wing,
And cried in sudden pain, but could not sing.

The sparrow twittered, "'Tis dark under the eaves,
And sad-eyed Margot sits at home and grieves."
The lark said, "God is angry in bright Heaven.
I saw Him once,—a great white fluttering bird
With beautiful broad wings that oft are heard
When the wind beats the blue nave of the skies.
I saw Him perching high upon the moon
With the most dreadful anguish in His eyes.
He flaps His wings, and tries, and wildly tries;
But *He* can sing no longer.
It is still in Heaven.
It is still in forest and on hill.
The green leaves wither, and the world grows chill."

[Pg 29]

A SINN FEINER

I once had the trustiest comrade—
God grant he thinks kindly of me—
And we always stood shoulder to shoulder
When a tossing wind troubled Life's sea.
He was like the marsh fire in fair weather;
Though in foul, we made merry together.

But his soul was knit to the whirlwind—
The fen mists but shrouded the flame—
And I knew not our friendship's attachment
Till the day that the whirlwind came,
For I saw our lives broken asunder
And watched him away with the thunder.

Men said he consorted with traitors
And marshalled the beasts of the sty.
But I know that mere mischief makers
Don't joyfully go forth to die.
And I've lost a friend like a brother,
And never I'll know such another.

THE FOREIGN LEGIONARY, 1911

[Pg 30]

He had just come out of prison, and he stood and scowled apart,
The old lust 'neath his ragged coat, and the cold hate in his heart;
And he peered to right and left through the cruel sleet and rain,
Then dived into the nearest street to rob and steal again.

He lay wounded in the desert where the thirsty sand gleamed red,
Arab spearmen thrusting at the dying and the dead;
He had left the shrunken ranks to save a comrade in the rear;
And he raised himself and cursed them; and went down beneath a spear.

He lies and stares at Heaven through a cloud of crows and kites;
While round him prowl the jackals in the lurid tropic nights.
And he'll slowly bleach to powder 'neath the sunlight's livid scroll,

THE MISSIONARY

[Pg 31]

(Freely adapted from a Foreign Tongue)

You speak of worlds with rainbow prospects vaulted.
But not for these the service that I hoard.
You know the sweet; but I—the pure, exalted:
My soul spreads wings to her exalted Lord.

My sphere of lowly service is more spacious
Than earthly masters and their tasks afford;
For gentle is my Lord, and very gracious:
I serve with willing hands my gracious Lord.

I know dark realms where no glad light is burning,
Where Life meets Death, and bows beneath his sword;
But yet I fear not; for He is discerning:
I lean upon my wise, discerning Lord.

And when I'm stripped of all, requited latest,
His kind "Well Done" my guerdon, my reward:
Though yours be richer, yet my Lord's the greatest.
I follow Him—the mightiest, greatest Lord.

[Some of these poems have already appeared in The English Review, Country Life, T. P.'s Magazine and the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine. I thank the Editors for permission to reproduce them.]

THE RIVERSIDE PRESS LIMITED, EDINBURGH

[Pg 32]

FOOTNOTE:

[1] The Saint Peter's Inn at Walporzheim, Ahrdale.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES:

Inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation have been retained from the original.

It is not always possible to determine if a new stanza begins at the top of a printed page, but every effort has been made by the transcriber to retain stanza breaks where appropriate.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO FISHERS, AND OTHER POEMS ***

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