



Source: Mark Landler, 'Amid exodus, many tourists opt to stay in Egypt', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 25/07/05.

Tags: [plants](#), [literature](#), [water](#), [animals](#)

Writer/s: [Nola Farman](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

It was not such an unusual sight after all, the two of us walking side-by-side and deep in conversation. It is obvious that he was accustomed to walking long distances because it was not until he was in his middle years that he could afford a horse. I was under the impression that he had once walked from Geneva to Paris and at an earlier time to Venice for his first employment of any consequence. And he had not lost the habit. He was at the time of our walk 64 years of age and the year was 1776. Walking was for him a time for reverie and close observation of both weeds and people. He often referred to them as if they might be interchangeable. However it is the plant form that he claimed he respected most of all. Sometimes after we had been walking for a time in profound silence he would cry out as if he had forgotten that I existed, 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil!' I would not dare to respond, but would spend a little thought (to no avail) on the idea of the category of 'evil weed'! But I understood something of the outburst from this man at this time. He was embattled by the human predicament, no less his own, in which he believed that mankind had been betrayed by its own cultural traditions that separated the senses from the heart. I preferred it when he rolled out the Latin names of even the most lowly of plants and referred to this habit of close observation as 'botanising'. Just the same, he was very patient when it came to my slow walk and my minimal talk.

One day as we were strolling along the banks of the Seine close to the sea, he told me about his first horse. He described in detail its fine appearance with its bobbed tail and carefully groomed coat. He said, 'He was my little white favourite and he pranced under me with such fire and such high mettle'. As he spoke the curls on his bob-wig (as finely groomed as a judge's) would bounce and spring back into shape as he swung his head in a fine equine imitation.

Just then a voice rang out. 'Watch it!' A man was fishing at the water's edge. My companion was visibly irritated at the intrusion and grumbled aside, 'Ah, the tag, rag and bob-tail!' The man was dressed in homespun cloth, his black hair was tied back in a short knob-like bunch and he

was poised to throw something into the water. It was the most peculiar thing that I think that I have ever seen. The man held a rounded mass at the end of a rod that he was swinging wildly but nonetheless with some ease. It was a large and soft looking thing made from cloth, worsted I think. To my horror I saw that it was writhing with worms!

'What in the name of Hope is that repulsive thing?' I cried.

My friend laughed and slapped his side. 'He's fishing for eels. They're lob-worms.'

Just as I was about to ask him what in Despair's name is a lob-worm, he stepped forward and before I could speak a word, with my mouth wide open, my friend stepped into the coil of rope that led to the rough hand that was at precisely that moment swinging the horrible squirming thing far out into the river. I lunged forward to try to stop his fall. Too late and yet too soon. I slipped and in the course of my fall I plunged forward adding considerable force to the forward and downward-into-the-river trajectory of my beloved friend. In that slow motion descent I could hear my disembodied cry.

'Oh, Jean-Jacques, *quel dommage!* Désolé! ! Désolé!'

Time had slowed to the extent that I believe I could have uttered the whole of the Lord's Prayer before we both sank some distance into the chilled, silty depths of the river. After some spluttering we rose to the surface, ourselves a soggy mass of great coats and stockings with our shoes miraculously still on our feet. The man on the bank had thrown us a rope, which had a knot in the end. Unfortunately, with the acute focus of a plumb-bob the weight of it sank Jean-Jacques for the second time. This time he burst through the surface with a roar of rage and bobbed up and down spluttering Latin expletives that fortunately my education was so lacking as to translate. It was the fisherman's turn to laugh as we dragged ourselves slithering and sliding somehow back to the top of the bank.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nola Farman.*