

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE FLOOD

Émile Zola
The Flood

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25560524

The Flood:

Содержание

I	4
II	11
III	18
IV	24
V	30
VI	36

Émile Zola

The Flood

I

My name is Louis Roubien. I am seventy years old. I was born in the village of Saint-Jory, several miles up the Garonne from Toulouse.

For fourteen years I battled with the earth for my daily bread. At last, prosperity smiled on we, and last month I was still the richest farmer in the parish.

Our house seemed blessed, happiness reigned there. The sun was our brother, and I cannot recall a bad crop. We were almost a dozen on the farm. There was myself, still hale and hearty, leading the children to work; then my young brother, Pierre, an old bachelor and retired sergeant; then my sister, Agathe, who came to us after the death of her husband. She was a commanding woman, enormous and gay, whose laugh could be heard at the other end of the village. Then came all the brood: my son, Jacques; his wife, Rosie, and their three daughters, Aimee, Veronique, and Marie. The first named was married to Cyprien Bouisson, a big jolly fellow, by whom she had two children, one two years old and the other ten months. Veronique was just betrothed, and was soon to marry Gaspard Rabuteau. The third,

Marie, was a real young lady, so white, so fair, that she looked as if born in the city.

That made ten, counting everybody. I was a grandfather and a great-grandfather. When we were at table I had my sister, Agathe, at my right, and my brother, Pierre, at my left. The children formed a circle, seated according to age, with the heads diminishing down to the baby of ten months, who already ate his soup like a man. And let me tell you that the spoons in the plates made a clatter. The brood had hearty appetites. And what gayety between the mouthfuls! I was filled with pride and joy when the little ones held out their hands toward me, crying:

“Grandpa, give us some bread! A big piece, grandpa!”

Oh! the good days! Our farm sang from every corner. In the evening, Pierre invented games and related stories of his regiment. On Sunday Agathe made cakes for the girls. Marie knew some canticles, which she sang like a chorister. She looked like a saint, with her blond hair falling on her neck and her hands folded on her apron.

I had built another story on the house when Aimee had married Cyprien; and I said laughingly that I would have to build another after the wedding of Veronique and Gaspard. We never cared to leave each other. We would sooner have built a city behind the farm, in our enclosure. When families are united, it is so good to live and die where one has grown up!

The month of May had been magnificent that year. It was long since the crops gave such good promise. That day precisely, I had

made a tour of inspection with my son, Jacques. We started at about three o'clock. Our meadows on the banks of the Garonne were of a tender green. The grass was three feet high, and an osier thicket, planted the year before, had sprouts a yard high. From there we went to visit our wheat and our vines, fields bought one by one as fortune came to us. The wheat was growing strong; the vines, in full flower, promised a superb vintage. And Jacques laughed his good laugh as he slapped me on the shoulder.

"Well, father, we shall never want for bread nor for wine. You must be a friend of the Divine Power to have silver showered upon your land in this way."

We often joked among ourselves of our past poverty. Jacques was right. I must have gained the friendship of some saint or of God himself, for all the luck in the country was for us. When it hailed the hail ceased on the border of our fields. If the vines of our neighbors fell sick, ours seemed to have a wall of protection around them. And in the end I grew to consider it only just. Never doing harm to any one, I thought that happiness was my due.

As we approached the house, Rose gesticulated, calling out: "Hurry up!"

One of our cows had just had a calf, and everybody was excited. The birth of that little beast seemed one more blessing. We had been obliged recently to enlarge the stables, where we had nearly one hundred head of animals – cows and sheep, without counting the horses.

"Well, a good day's work!" I cried. "We will drink to-night a

bottle of ripened wine.”

Meanwhile, Rose took us aside and told us that Gaspard, Veronique’s betrothed, had come to arrange the day for the wedding. She had invited him to remain for dinner.

Gaspard, the oldest son of a farmer of Moranges, was a big boy of twenty years, known throughout the country for his prodigious strength. During a festival at Toulouse he had vanquished Martial, the “Lion of the Midi.” With that, a nice boy, with a heart of gold. He was even timid, and he blushed when Veronique looked him squarely in the face.

I told Rose to call him. He was at the bottom of the yard, helping our servants to spread out the freshly-washed linen. When he entered the dining room, where we were, Jacques turned toward me, saying:

“You speak, father.”

“Well,” I said, “you have come, my boy, to have us set the great day?”

“Yes, that is it, Father Roubien,” he answered, very red.

“You mustn’t blush, my boy,” I continued. “It will be, if you wish, on Saint-Felicite day, the 10th of July. This is the 23rd of June, so you will have only twenty days to wait. My poor dead wife was called Felicite, and that will bring you happiness. Well? Is it understood?”

“Yes, that will do – Sainte-Felicite day. Father Roubien.”

And he gave each of us a grip that made us wince. Then he embraced Rose, calling her mother. This big boy with the terrific

fists loved Veronique to the point of losing his appetite.

“Now,” I continued, “you must remain for dinner. Well, everybody to the table. I have a thundering appetite, I have.”

That evening we were eleven at table. Gaspard was placed next to Veronique, and he sat looking at her, forgetting his plate, so moved at the thought of her belonging to him that, at times, the tears sprang to his eyes. Cyprien and Aimee, married only three years, smiled. Jacques and Rose, who had had twenty-five years of married life, were more serious, but, surreptitiously, they exchanged tender glances. As for me, I seemed to relive in those two sweethearts, whose happiness seemed to bring a corner of Paradise to our table. What good soup we had that evening! Aunt Agathe, always ready with a witticism, risked several jokes. Then that honest Pierre wanted to relate his love affair with a young lady of Lyons. Fortunately, we were at the dessert, and every one was talking at once. I had brought two bottles of mellowed wine from the cellar. We drank to the good fortune of Gaspard and Veronique. Then we had singing. Gaspard knew some love songs in dialect. We also asked Marie for a canticle. She stood up and sang in a flute-like voice that tickled one’s ears.

I went to the window, and Gaspard joined me there.

“Is there no news up your way?” I asked him.

“No,” he answered. “There is considerable talk about the heavy rains of the last few days. Some seem to think that they will cause trouble.”

In effect, it had rained for sixty hours without stopping. The

Garonne was very much swollen since the preceding day, but we had confidence in it, and, as long as it did not overflow its banks, we could not look on it as a bad neighbor.

“Bah!” I exclaimed, shrugging my shoulders. “Nothing will happen. It is the same every year. The river puts up her back as if she were furious, and she calms down in a night. You will see, my boy, that it will amount to nothing this time. See how beautiful the weather is!”

And I pointed to the sky. It was seven o'clock; the sun was setting. The sky was blue, an immense blue sheet of profound purity, in which the rays of the setting sun were like a golden dust. Never had I seen the village drowsing in so sweet a peace. Upon the tiled roofs a rosy tint was fading. I heard a neighbor's laugh, then the voices of children at the turn in the road in front of our place. Farther away and softened by the distance, rose the sounds of flocks entering their sheds. The great voice of the Garonne roared continually; but it was to me as the voice of the silence, so accustomed to it was I.

Little by little the sky paled; the village became more drowsy. It was the evening of a beautiful day; and I thought that all our good fortune – the big harvests, the happy house, the betrothal of Veronique – came to us from above in the purity of the dying light. A benediction spread over us with the farewell of the evening.

Meanwhile I had returned to the center of the room. The girls were chattering. We listened to them, smiling. Suddenly,

across the serenity of the country, a terrible cry sounded, a cry of distress and death:

“The Garonne! The Garonne!”

II

We rushed out into the yard. Saint-Jory is situated at the bottom of a slope at about five hundred yards from the Garonne. Screens of tall poplars that divide the meadows, hide the river completely.

We could see nothing. And still the cry rang out:

“The Garonne! The Garonne!”

Suddenly, on the wide road before us, appeared two men and three women, one of them holding a child in her arms. It was they who were crying out, distracted, running with long strides. They turned at times, looking behind with terrified faces, as if a band of wolves was pursuing them.

“What’s the matter with them?” demanded Cyprien. “Do you see anything, grandfather?”

“No,” I answered. “The leaves are not even moving.”

I was still talking when an exclamation burst from us. Behind the fugitives there appeared, between the trunks of the poplars, amongst the large tufts of grass, what looked like a pack of gray beasts speckled with yellow. They sprang up from all directions, waves crowding waves, a helter-skelter of masses of foaming water, shaking the sod with the rumbling gallop of their hordes.

It was our turn to send forth the despairing cry:

“The Garonne! The Garonne!”

The two men and the three women were still running on the

road. They heard the terrible gallop gaining on them. Now the waves arrived in a single line, rolling, tumbling with the thunder of a charging battalion. With their first shock they had broken three poplars; the tall foliage sank and disappeared. A wooden cabin was swallowed up, a wall was demolished; heavy carts were carried away like straws. But the water seemed, above all, to pursue the fugitives. At the bend in the road, where there was a steep slope, it fell suddenly in an immense sheet and cut off retreat. They continued to run, nevertheless, splashing through the water, no longer shouting, mad with terror. The water swirled about their knees. An enormous wave felled the woman who was carrying the child. Then all were engulfed.

“Quick! Quick!” I cried. “We must get into the house. It is solid – we have nothing to fear.”

We took refuge upstairs. The house was built on a hillock above the road. The water invaded the yard, softly, with a little rippling noise. We were not much frightened.

“Bah!” said Jacques, to reassure every one, “this will not amount to anything. You remember, father, in ‘55, the water came up into the yard. It was a foot deep. Then it receded.”

“It is disastrous for the crops, just the same,” murmured Cyprien.

“No, it will not be anything,” I said, seeing the large questioning eyes of our girls.

Aimee had put her two children into the bed. She sat beside them, with Veronique and Marie. Aunt Agathe spoke of heating

some wine she had brought up, to give us courage.

Jacques and Rose were looking out of a window. I was at the other, with my brother Pierre, Cyprien and Gaspard.

“Come up!” I cried to our two servants, who were wading in the yard. “Don’t stay there and get all wet.”

“But the animals?” they asked. “They are afraid. They are killing each other in the barn.”

“No, no; come up! After a while we’ll see to them.”

The rescue of the animals would be impossible, if the disaster was to attain greater proportions. I thought it unnecessary to frighten the family. So I forced myself to appear hopeful. Leaning on the windowsill, I indicated the progress of the flood. The river, after its attack on the village, was in possession even to the narrowest streets. It was no longer a galloping charge, but a slow and invincible strangulation. The hollow in the bottom of which Saint-Jory is built was changed into a lake. In our yard the water was soon three feet deep. But I asserted that it remained stationary – I even went so far as to pretend that it was going down.

“Well, you will be obliged to sleep here to-night, my boy,” I said, turning to Gaspard. “That is, unless the roads are free in a couple of hours – which is quite possible.”

He looked at me without answering, his face quite pale; and I saw him look at Veronique with an expression of anguish.

It was half-past eight o’clock. It was still daylight – a pale, sad light beneath the blanched sky. The servants had had the

forethought to bring up two lamps with them. I had them lighted, thinking that they would brighten up the somber room. Aunt Agathe, who had rolled a table to the middle of the room, wished to organize a card party. The worthy woman, whose eyes sought mine momentarily, thought above all of diverting the children. Her good humor kept up a superb bravery; and she laughed to combat the terror that she felt growing around her. She forcibly placed Aimee, Veronique, and Marie at the table. She put the cards into their hands, took a hand herself with an air of intense interest, shuffling, cutting, dealing with such a flow of talk that she almost drowned the noise of the water. But our girls could not be diverted; they were pale, with feverish hands, and ears on the alert. Every few moments there was a pause in the play. One of them would turn to me, asking in a low voice:

“Grandpa, is it still rising?”

“No, no. Go on with the game. There is no danger.”

Never had my heart been gripped by such agony. All the men placed themselves at the windows to hide the terrifying sight. We tried to smile, turned toward the peaceful lamps that threw discs of light upon the table. I recalled our winter evenings, when we gathered around the table. It was the same quiet interior, filled with the warmth of affection. And while peace was there I heard behind me the roaring of the escaped river, that was constantly rising.

“Louis,” said my brother Pierre, “the water is within three feet of the window. We ought to tell them.”

I hushed him up by pressing his arm. But it was no longer possible to hide the peril. In our barns the animals were killing each other. There were bleatings and bellowings from the crazed herds; and the horses gave the harsh cries that can be heard at great distances when they are in danger of death.

“My God! My God!” cried Aimee, who stood up, pressing her hands to her temples.

They all ran to the windows. There they remained, mute, their hair rising with fear. A dim light floated above the yellow sheet of water. The pale sky looked like a white cloth thrown over the earth. In the distance trailed some smoke. Everything was misty. It was the terrified end of a day melting into a night of death. And not a human sound, nothing but the roaring of that sea stretching to infinity; nothing but the bellowings and the neighings of the animals.

“My God! My God!” repeated the women, in low voices, as if they feared to speak aloud.

A terrible cracking silenced the exclamations. The maddened animals had burst open the doors of the stables. They passed in the yellow flood, rolled about, carried away by the current. The sheep were tossed about like dead leaves, whirling in bands in the eddies. The cows and the horses struggled, tried to walk, and lost their footing. Our big gray horse fought long for life. He stretched his neck, he reared, snorting like a forge. But the enraged waters took him by the crupper, and we saw him, beaten, abandon himself.

Then we gave way for the first time. We felt the need of tears. Our hands stretched out to those dear animals that were being borne away, we lamented, giving vent to the tears and the sobs that we had suppressed. Ah! what ruin! The harvests destroyed, the cattle drowned, our fortunes changed in a few hours! God was not just! We had done nothing against Him, and He was taking everything from us! I shook my fist at the horizon. I spoke of our walk that afternoon, of our meadows, our wheat and vines that we had found so full of promise. It was all a lie, then! The sun lied when he sank, so sweet and calm, in the midst of the evening's serenity.

The water was still rising. Pierre, who was watching it, cried: "Louis, we must look out! The water is up to the window!"

That warning snatched us from our spell of despair. I was once more myself. Shrugging my shoulders, I said:

"Money is nothing. As long as we are all saved, there need be no regrets. We shall have to work again – that is all!"

"Yes, yes; you are right, father," said Jacques, feverishly. "And we run no danger – the walls are good and strong. We must get up on the roof."

That was the only refuge left us. The water, which had mounted the stairs step by step, was already coming through the door. We rushed to the attic in a group, holding close to each other. Cyprien had disappeared. I called him, and I saw him return from the next room, his face working with emotion. Then, as I remarked the absence of the servants, for whom I was

waiting, he gave me a strange look, then said, in a suppressed voice:

“Dead! The corner of the shed under their room caved in.”

The poor girls must have gone to fetch their savings from their trunks. I told him to say nothing about it. A cold shiver had passed over me. It was Death entering the house.

When we went up, in our turn, we did not even think of putting out the lights. The cards remained spread upon the table. There was already a foot of water in the room.

III

Fortunately, the roof was vast and sloped gently. We reached it through a lid-like window, above which was a sort of platform. It was there that we took refuge. The women seated themselves. The men went over the tiles to reconnoitre. From my post against the dormer window through which we had climbed, I examined the four points of the horizon.

“Help cannot fail to arrive,” I said, bravely. “The people of Saintin have boats; they will come this way. Look over there! Isn’t that a lantern on the water?”

But no one answered me. Pierre had lighted his pipe, and he was smoking so furiously that, at each puff, he spit out pieces of the stem. Jacques and Cyprien looked into the distance, with drawn faces; while Gaspard, clenching his fists, continued to walk about, seeking an issue. At our feet the women, silent and shivering, hid their faces to shut out the sight. Yet Rose raised her head, glanced about her and demanded:

“And the servants? Where are they? Why, aren’t they here?”

I avoided answering. She then questioned me, her eyes on mine.

“Where are the servants?”

I turned away, unable to lie. I felt that chill that had already brushed me pass over our women and our dear girls. They had understood. Marie burst into tears. Aimee wrapped her two

children in her skirt, as if to protect them. Veronique, her face in her hands, did not move. Aunt Agathe, very pale, made the sign of the cross, and mumbled Paters and Aves.

Meanwhile the spectacle about us became of sovereign grandeur. The night retained the clearness of a summer night. There was no moon, but the sky was sprinkled with stars, and was of so pure a blue that it seemed to fill space with a blue light. And the immense sheet of water expanded beneath the softness of the sky. We could no longer see any land.

“The water is rising; the water is rising!” repeated my brother Pierre, still crunching the stem of his pipe between his teeth.

The water was within a yard of the roof. It was losing its tranquility; currents were being formed. In less than an hour the water became threatening, dashing against the house, bearing drifting barrels, pieces of wood, clumps of weeds. In the distance there were attacks upon walls, and we could hear the resounding shocks. Poplar trees fell, houses crumbled, like a cartload of stones emptied by the roadside.

Jacques, unnerved by the sobs of the women, cried:

“We can’t stay here. We must try something. Father, I beg of you, try to do something.”

I stammered after him:

“Yes, yes; let us try to do something.”

And we knew of nothing. Gaspard offered to take Veronique on his back and swim with her to a place of safety. Pierre suggested a raft. Cyprien finally said:

"If we could only reach the church!"

Above the waters the church remained standing, with its little square steeple. We were separated from it by seven houses. Our farmhouse, the first of the village, adjoined a higher building, which, in turn, leaned against the next. Perhaps, by way of the roofs, we would be able to reach the parsonage. A number of people must have taken refuge there already, for the neighboring roofs were vacant, and we could hear voices that surely came from the steeple. But what dangers must be run to reach them!

"It is impossible," said Pierre. "The house of the Raimbeaus is too high; we would need ladders."

"I am going to try it," said Cyprien. "I will return if the way is impracticable. Otherwise, we will all go and we will have to carry the girls."

I let him go. He was right. We had to try the impossible. He had succeeded, by the aid of an iron hook fixed in a chimney, in climbing to the next house, when his wife, Aimee, raising her head, noticed that he was no longer with us. She screamed:

"Where is he? I don't want him to leave me! We are together, we shall die together!"

When she saw him on the top of the house she ran over the tiles, still holding her children. And she called out:

"Cyprien, wait for me! I am going with you. I am going to die with you."

She persisted. He leaned over, pleading with her, promising to come back, telling her that he was going for the rescue of all

of us. But, with a wild air, she shook her head, repeating "I am going with you! I am going with you!"

He had to take the children. Then he helped her up. We could follow them along the crest of the house. They walked slowly. She had taken the children again, and at every step he turned and supported her.

"Get her to a safe place, and return!" I shouted.

I saw him wave his hand, but the roaring of the water prevented my hearing his answer. Soon we could not see them. They had descended to the roof of the next house. At the end of five minutes they appeared upon the third roof, which must have been very steep, for they went on hands and knees along the summit. A sudden terror seized me. I put my hands to my mouth and shouted:

"Come back! Come back!"

Then all of us shouted together. Our voices stopped them for a moment, but they continued on their way. They reached the angle formed by the street upon which faced the Raimbeau house, a high structure, with a roof at least ten feet above those of the neighboring houses. For a moment they hesitated. Then Cyprien climbed up a chimney pipe, with the agility of a cat. Aimee, who must have consented to wait for him, stood on the tiles. We saw her plainly, black and enlarged against the pale sky, straining her children to her bosom. And it was then that the horrifying trouble began.

The Raimbeau house, originally intended for a factory, was

very flimsily built. Besides, the facade was exposed to the current in the street. I thought I could see it tremble from the attacks of the water; and, with a contraction of the throat, I watched Cyprien cross the roof. Suddenly a rumbling was heard. The moon rose, a round moon, whose yellow face lighted up the immense lake. Not a detail of the catastrophe was lost to us. The Raimbeau house collapsed. We gave a cry of terror as we saw Cyprien disappear. As the house crumbled we could distinguish nothing but a tempest, a swirling of waves beneath the debris of the roof. Then calm was restored, the surface became smooth; and out of the black hole of the engulfed house projected the skeleton of its framework. There was a mass of entangled beams, and, amongst them, I seemed to see a body moving, something living making superhuman efforts.

“He lives!” I cried. “Oh, God be praised! He lives!”

We laughed nervously; we clapped our hands, as if saved ourselves.

“He is going to raise himself up,” said Pierre.

“Yes, yes,” said Gaspard, “he is trying to seize the beam on his left.”

But our laugh ceased. We had just realized the terrible situation in which Cyprien was placed. During the fall of the house his feet had been caught between two beams, and he hung head downward within a few inches of the water. On the roof of the next house Aimee was still standing, holding her two children. A convulsive tremor shook her. She did not take her

eyes from her husband, a few yards below her. And, mad with horror, she emitted without cessation a lamentable sound like the howling of a dog.

“We can’t let him die like that,” said Jacques, distracted. “We must get down there.”

“Perhaps we could slide down the beams and save him,” remarked Pierre.

And they started toward the neighboring roof, when the second house collapsed, leaving a gap in the route. Then a chill seized us. We mechanically grasped each other’s hands, wringing them cruelly as we watched the harrowing sight.

Cyprien had tried at first to stiffen his body. With extraordinary strength, he had lifted himself above the water, holding his body in an oblique position. But the strain was too great. Nevertheless, he struggled, tried to reach some of the beams, felt around him for something to hold to. Then, resigning himself, he fell back again, hanging limp.

Death was slow in coming. The water barely covered his hair, and it rose very gradually. He must have felt its coolness on his brain. A wave wet his brow; others closed his eyes. Slowly we saw his head disappear.

The women, at our feet, had buried their faces in their clasped hands. We, ourselves, fell to our knees, our arms outstretched, weeping, stammering supplications.

On the other roof Aimee, still standing, her children clasped to her bosom, howled mournfully into the night.

IV

I know not how long we remained in a stupor after that tragedy. When I came to, the water had risen. It was now on a level with the tiles. The roof was a narrow island, emerging from the immense sheet. To the right and the left the houses must have crumbled.

“We are moving,” murmured Rose, who clung to the tiles.

And we all experienced the effect of rolling, as if the roof had become detached and turned into a raft. The swift currents seemed to be drifting us away. Then, when we looked at the church clock, immovable opposite us, the dizziness ceased; we found ourselves in the same place in the midst of the waves.

Then the water began an attack. Until then the stream had followed the street; but the debris that encumbered it deflected the course. And when a drifting object, a beam, came within reach of the current, it seized it and directed it against the house like a battering-ram. Soon ten, a dozen, beams were attacking us on all sides. The water roared. Our feet were spattered with foam. We heard the dull moaning of the house full of water. There were moments when the attacks became frenzied, when the beams battered fiercely; and then we thought that the end was near, that the walls would open and deliver us to the river.

Gaspard had risked himself upon the edge of the roof. He had seized a rafter and drawn it to him.

“We must defend ourselves,” he cried.

Jacques, on his side, had stopped a long pole in its passage. Pierre helped him. I cursed my age that left me without strength, as feeble as a child. But the defense was organized – a drill between three men and a river. Gaspard, holding his beam in readiness, awaited the driftwood that the current sent against us, and he stopped it a short distance from the walls. At times the shock was so rude that he fell. Beside him Jacques and Pierre manipulated the long pole. During nearly an hour that unending fight continued. And the water retained its tranquil obstinacy, invincible.

Then Jacques and Pierre succumbed, prostrated; while Gaspard, in a last violent thrust, had his beam wrested from him by the current. The combat was useless.

Marie and Veronique had thrown themselves into each other’s arms. They repeated incessantly one phrase – a phrase of terror that I still hear ringing in my ears:

“I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!”

Rose put her arms about them. She tried to console them, to reassure them. And she herself, trembling, raised her face and cried out, in spite of herself:

“I don’t want to die!”

Aunt Agathe alone said nothing. She no longer prayed, no longer made the sign of the cross. Bewildered, her eyes roamed about, and she tried to smile when her glance met mine.

The water was beating against the tiles now. There was no

hope of help. We still heard the voices in the direction of the church; two lanterns had passed in the distance; and the silence spread over the immense yellow sheet. The people of Saintin, who owned boats, must have been surprised before us.

Gaspard continued to wander over the Roof. Suddenly he called us.

“Look!” he said. “Help me – hold me tight!”

He had a pole and he was watching an enormous black object that was gently drifting toward the house. It was the roof of a shed, made of strong boards, and that was floating like a raft. When it was within reach he stopped it with the pole, and, as he felt himself being carried off, he called to us. We held him around the waist.

Then, as the mass entered the current, it returned against our roof so violently that we were afraid of seeing it smashed into splinters.

Gaspard jumped upon it boldly. He went over it carefully, to assure himself of its solidity. He laughed, saying joyously:

“Grandfather, we are saved! Don’t cry any more, you women. A real boat! Look, my feet are dry. And it will easily carry all of us!”

Still, he thought it well to make it more solid. He caught some floating beams and bound them to it with a rope that Pierre had brought up for an emergency. Gaspard even fell into the water, but at our screams he laughed. He knew the water well; he could swim three miles in the Garonne at a stretch. Getting up again,

he shook himself, crying:

“Come, get on it! Don’t lose any time!”

The women were on their knees. Gaspard had to carry Veronique and Marie to the middle of the raft, where he made them sit down.

Rose and Aunt Agathe slid down the tiles and placed themselves beside the young girls. At this moment I looked toward the church. Aimee was still in the same place. She was leaning now against a chimney, holding her children up at arm’s length, for the water was to her waist.

“Don’t grieve, grandfather,” said Gaspard. “We will take her off on the way.”

Pierre and Jacques were already on the raft, so I jumped on. Gaspard was the last one aboard. He gave us poles that he had prepared and that were to serve us as oars. He had a very long one that he used with great skill. We let him do all the commanding. At an order from him, we braced our poles against the tiles to put out into the stream. But it seemed as if the raft was attached to the roof. In spite of all our efforts, we could not budge it. At each new effort the current swung us violently against the house. And it was a dangerous manoeuvre, for the shock threatened to break up the planks composing the raft.

So once again we were made to feel our helplessness. We had thought ourselves saved, and we were still at the mercy of the river. I even regretted that the women were not on the roof; for, every minute, I expected to see them precipitated into the boiling

torrent. But when I suggested regaining our refuge they all cried: “No, no! Let us try again! Better die here!”

Gaspard no longer laughed. We renewed our efforts, bending to our poles with redoubled energy. Pierre then had the idea to climb up on the roof and draw us, by means of a rope, towards the left. He was thus able to draw us out of the current. Then, when he again jumped upon the raft, a few thrusts of our poles sent us out into the open. But Gaspard recalled the promise he had made me to stop for our poor Aimee, whose plaintive moans had never ceased. For that purpose it was necessary to cross the street, where the terrible current existed. He consulted me by a glance. I was completely upset. Never had such a combat raged within me. We would have to expose eight lives. And yet I had not the strength to resist the mournful appeal.

“Yes, yes,” I said to Gaspard. “We can not possibly go away without her!”

He lowered his head without a word, and began using his pole against all the walls left standing. We passed the neighboring house, but as soon as we emerged into the street a cry escaped us. The current, which had again seized us, carried us back against our house. We were whirled round like a leaf, so rapidly that our cry was cut short by the smashing of the raft against the tiles. There was a rending sound, the planks were loosened and wrenched apart, and we were all thrown into the water. I do not know what happened then. I remember that when I sank I saw Aunt Agathe floating, sustained by her skirts, until she went

down backward, head first, without a struggle.

A sharp pain brought me to. Pierre was dragging me by the hair along the tiles. I lay still, stupidly watching. Pierre had plunged in again. And, in my confused state, I was surprised to see Gaspard at the spot where my brother had disappeared. The young man had Veronique in his arms. When he had placed her near me he again jumped in, bringing up Marie, her face so waxy white that I thought her dead. Then he plunged again. But this time he searched in vain. Pierre had joined him. They talked and gave each other indications that I could not hear. As they drew themselves up on the roof, I cried:

“And Aunt Agathe? And Jacques? And Rose?”

They shook their heads. Large tears coursed down their cheeks. They explained to me that Jacques had struck his head against a beam and that Rose had been carried down with her husband's body, to which she clung. Aunt Agathe had not reappeared.

Raising myself, I looked toward the roof, where Aimee stood. The water was rising constantly. Aimee was now silent. I could see her upstretched arms holding her children out of the water. Then they all sank, the water closed over them beneath the drowsy light of the moon.

V

There were only five of us on the roof now. The water left us but a narrow band along the ridge. One of the chimneys had just been carried away. We had to raise Marie and Veronique, who were still unconscious, and support them almost in a standing position to prevent the waves washing over their legs. At last, their senses returned, and our anguish increased upon seeing them wet, shivering and crying miserably that they did not wish to die.

The end had come. The destroyed village was marked by a few vestiges of walls. Alone, the church reared its steeple intact, from whence came the voices – a murmur of human beings in a refuge. There were no longer any sounds of falling houses, like a cart of stones suddenly discharged. It was as if we were abandoned, shipwrecked, a thousand miles from land.

One moment we thought we heard the dip of oars. Ah! what hopeful music! How we all strained our eyes into space! We held our breath. But we could see nothing. The yellow sheet stretched away, spotted with black shadows. But none of those shadows – tops of trees, remnants of walls – moved. Driftwood, weeds, empty barrels caused us false joy. We waved our handkerchiefs until, realizing our error, we again succumbed to our anxiety.

“Ah, I see it!” cried Gaspard, suddenly. “Look over there. A large boat!”

And he pointed out a distant speck. I could see nothing,

neither could Pierre. But Gaspard insisted it was a boat. The sound of oars became distinct. At last, we saw it. It was proceeding slowly and seemed to be circling about us without approaching. I remember that we were like mad. We raised our arms in our fury; we shouted with all our might. And we insulted the boat, called it cowardly. But, dark and silent, it glided away slowly. Was it really a boat? I do not know to this day. When it disappeared it carried our last hope.

We were expecting every second to be engulfed with the house. It was undermined and was probably supported by one solid wall, which, in giving way, would pull everything with it. But what terrified me most was to feel the roof sway under our feet. The house would perhaps hold out overnight, but the tiles were sinking in, beaten and pierced by beams. We had taken refuge on the left side on some solid rafters. Then these rafters seemed to weaken. Certainly they would sink if all five of us remained in so small a space.

For some minutes my brother Pierre had been twisting his soldierly mustache, frowning and muttering to himself. The growing danger that surrounded him and against which his courage availed nothing, was wearing out his endurance. He spat two or three times into the water, with an expression of contemptuous anger. Then, as we sank lower, he made up his mind; he started down the roof.

“Pierre! Pierre!” I cried, fearing to comprehend.

He turned and said quietly:

“Adieu, Louis! You see, it is too long for me. And it will leave more room for you.”

And, first throwing in his pipe, he plunged, adding:

“Good night! I have had enough!”

He did not come up. He was not a strong swimmer, and he probably abandoned himself, heart-broken at the death of our dear ones and at our ruin.

Two o'clock sounded from the steeple of the church. The night would soon end – that horrible night already so filled with agony and tears. Little by little, beneath our feet, the small dry space grew smaller. The current had changed again. The drift, passed to the right of the village, floating slowly, as if the water, nearing its highest level, was reposing, tired and lazy.

Gaspard suddenly took off his shoes and his shirt. I watched him for a moment as he wrung his hands. When I questioned him he said:

“Listen, grandfather; it is killing me to wait. I cannot stay here. Let me do as I wish. I will save her.”

He was speaking of Veronique. I opposed him. He would never have the strength to carry the young girl to the church. But he was obstinate.

“Yes, I can! My arms are strong. I feel myself able. You will see. I love her – I will save her!”

I was silent. I drew Marie to my breast. Then he thought I was reproaching the selfishness of his love. He stammered:

“I will return and get Marie. I swear it. I will find a boat and

organize a rescue party. Have confidence in me, grandfather!"

Rapidly, he explained to Veronique that she must not struggle, that she must submit without a movement, and that she must not be afraid. The young girl answered "yes" to everything, with a distracted look. Then, after making the sign of the cross, he slid down the roof, holding Veronique by a rope that he had looped under her arms. She gave a scream, beat the water with arms and legs, and, suffocated, she fainted.

"I like this better!" Gaspard called to me. "Now, I can answer for her!"

It can be imagined with what agony I followed them with my eyes. On the white surface, I could see Gaspard's slightest movement. He held the young girl by means of the rope that he coiled around his neck; and he carried her thus, half thrown over his right shoulder. The crushing weight bore him under at times. But he advanced, swimming with superhuman strength. I was no longer in doubt. He had traversed a third of the distance when he struck against something submerged. The shock was terrible. Both disappeared. Then I saw him reappear alone. The rope must have snapped. He plunged twice. At last, he came up with Veronique, whom he again took on his back. But without the rope to hold her, she weighed him down more than ever. Still, he advanced. A tremor shook me as I saw them approaching the church. Suddenly, I saw some beams bearing down upon them. A second shock separated them and the waters closed over them.

From this moment, I was stupefied. I had but the instinct of the

animal looking out for its own safety. When the water advanced, I retreated. In that stupor, I heard someone laughing, without explaining to myself who it was. The dawn appeared, a great white daybreak. It was very fresh and very calm, as on the bank of a pond, the surface of which awakens before sunrise. But the laughter sounded continually.

Turning, I saw Marie, standing in her wet clothes. It was she who was laughing.

Ah! the poor, dear child! How sweet and pretty she was at that early hour! I saw her stoop, take up some water in the hollow of her hand, and wash her face. Then she coiled her beautiful blonde hair. Doubtless, she imagined she was in her little room, dressing while the church bell rang merrily. And she continued to laugh her childish laugh, her eyes bright and her face happy.

I, too, began to laugh, infected with her madness. Terror had destroyed her mind; and it was a mercy, so charmed did she appear with the beauty of the morning.

I let her hasten, not understanding, shaking my head tenderly. When she considered herself ready to go, she sang one of her canticles in her clear crystalline voice. But, interrupting herself, she cried, as if responding to someone who had called her:

“I am coming, I am coming!”

She took up the canticle again, went down the roof, and entered the water. It covered her softly, without a ripple. I had not ceased smiling. I looked with happiness upon the spot where she had just disappeared.

Then, I remembered nothing more. I was alone on the roof. The water had risen. A chimney was standing, and I must have clung to it with all my strength, like an animal that dreads death. Then, nothing, nothing, a black pit, oblivion.

VI

Why am I still here? They tell me that people from Saintin came toward six o'clock, with boats, and that they found me lying on a chimney, unconscious. The water was cruel not to have carried me away to be with those who were dear to me.

All the others are gone! The babes in swaddling clothes, the girls to be married, the young married couples, the old married couples. And I, I live like a useless weed, coarse and dried, rooted in the rock. If I had the courage, I would say like Pierre:

"I have had enough! Good night!" And I would throw myself into the Garonne.

I have no child, my house is destroyed, my fields are devastated. Oh! the evenings when we were all at table, and the gaiety surrounded me and kept me young. Oh! the great days of harvest and vintage when we all worked, and when we returned to the house proud of our wealth! Oh! the handsome children and the fruitful vines, the beautiful girls and the golden grain, the joy of my old age, the living recompense of my entire life! Since all that is gone, why should I live?

There is no consolation. I do not want help. I will give my fields to the village people who still have their children. They will find the courage to clear the land of the flotsam and cultivate it anew. When one has no children, a corner is large enough to die in.

I had one desire, one only desire. I wished to recover the bodies of my family, to bury them beneath a slab, where I should soon rejoin them. It was said that, at Toulouse, a large number of bodies carried down the stream, had been taken from the water. I decided to make the trip.

What a terrible disaster! Nearly two thousand houses in ruins; seven hundred deaths; all the bridges carried away; a whole district razed, buried in the mud; atrocious tragedies; twenty thousand half-clad wretches starving to death; the city in a pestilential condition; mourning everywhere; the streets filled with funeral processions; financial aid powerless to heal the wounds! But I walked through it all without seeing anything. I had my ruins, I had my dead, to crush me.

I was told that many of the bodies had been buried in trenches in a corner of the cemetery. Only, they had had the forethought to photograph the unidentified. And it was among these lamentable photographs that I found Gaspard and Veronique. They had been clasped passionately in each other's arms, exchanging in death their bridal kiss. It had been necessary to break their arms in order to separate them. But, first, they had been photographed together; and they sleep together beneath the sod.

I have nothing but them, the image of those two handsome children; bloated by the water, disfigured, retaining upon their livid faces the heroism of their love. I look at them, and I weep.