

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE FLOOD

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Содержание

I	4
II	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	13

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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 Cyprica 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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