

Name: _____

Station 4: “The Flood”: Mental and Physical Preparedness

Text

Step 1: “The Flood,” Part I, by Émile Zola

Directions: Listen and read Part I of the “The Flood”.

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!"

Step 1: “The Flood,” Part II, by Émile Zola**Directions:** Listen and read Part II of “The Flood.”**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.