A Flood

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It seemed to him that he was in very cold muddy water full of little waves, and that by treading water and putting forth all his strength he was able to keep himself above them. But the wind blew them higher; they slapped him in the mouth, and he had much trouble in getting his breath between. All of a sudden it occurred to him that it would be much easier to abandon this painful striving and to lie back amid the waves. He took a long deep breath, the water slipped down into his lungs, and he lay quite natural and comfortable until a dinning sound began over his head. He tried to sink deeper into the stream, but the noise grew louder and he could not but think that he was rising to the surface. At last he opened his eyes.

"It's this infernal rain on the roof that makes me dream," he said.

A bed had been made up for him in the kitchen on three chairs, and when he awoke he found himself sitting bolt upright with his arms bent as if he were treading water, his legs stiff and numbed with cold. The hearth was full of ashes with a last spark fading in the dawn light, and catching an end of his blanket he rubbed his hands against it. His perceptions lengthened out and he went to the window; but seeing water everywhere he fancied for a moment that he must be still dreaming. The pigs had broken out of their styes and were swimming amid various wreckage; the house dog was swimming alongside of his kennel; the hens rose in short flights — two were already drowned, the others were drowning but the cock perched on his coop crowed defiantly. Tom looked to where the day was breaking; a thin pale light soaked slowly through the clouds, and he could just distinguish the top of the willows above the water.

The staircase behind him creaked, and turning hurriedly he saw old Daddy Lupton awful in his night-shirt, like Death himself coming to bid him good morning.

"Well," said Daddy, "what do 'ee think about the jade now! She makes one feel young again. The biggest flood we've had these fifty years."

The old man's levity inspired hope in Tom that the river would not rise any higher, and that the house was not in danger. Tom asked him if this were so, but Daddy continued to babble of a great flood of sixty years ago in which he had nearly lost his life. A big flood it was, but nothing to the great flood of nearly eighty years ago. It had carried a village quite away, and the old man followed Tom to the window, telling him how the water had come down the valley faster than a horse could gallop.

"All my brothers and sisters were drowned, father and mother too; but the cradle floated right away as far as Harebridge, where it was picked up by a party in a boat. There h'ant been no flood to speak of since then. A fine jade she once was, and when it rained like this we used to lie quaking in our beds. Now we sleep sound enough."

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"I must wake 'em," said Tom.

He rushed upstairs, called out, and in a few minutes the pointsman and his family were standing in the kitchen: John Lupton, a tall man with a long neck and thin square shoulders, a red beard and small queer eyes and hands freckled and hairy, and Margaret Lupton, his wife, a pleasant portly woman of forty, with soft blue eyes and regular features. Her daughter, Liz, took after her father — a thin-shouldered, thin-featured girl with small ardent eyes and dark reddish crinkly hair. But Billy, Liz's brother, took after his mother. He was very like her, the same soft oval face with blue eyes and no distinctive feature; the same sweet retiring nature, more of a girl than a boy; but the boy in him expressed a certain curiosity for Tom's boat.

"Shall we go in the boat, father?"

"What boat, sonny?"

"Tom's boat."

"Tom's boat wouldn't hold us all."

"We needn't all go together."

"My boat is far enough from 'ere by this time," said Tom, "or most like she's at the bottom of the river. I tied her last night to the old willow."

Tom was a fair-complexioned, broad-shouldered young fellow, an apple grower that lived on the other side of the river. He and Liz were to be married at the end of the week, and yesterday being Sunday he had rowed himself across at sundown; and they had gone for their wonted walk. When they came home supper was on the table, and the hours after had gone by pleasantly, his arm being round Liz's waist, till the time came for him to bid her good night, but seeing the swollen river she had turned her pretty freckled face to his and dissuaded him, and they had returned to the cottage.

"I never seed the river rise so quickly afore," said Lupton.

"I did. I did."

It was Daddy that had answered. He was still in his nightshirt, and his last tooth shook in his white beard.

"Go and dress 'eeself, father. And why, mother, don't 'ee light the fire? The morning is that rare cold we'll all be the better for a cup of tea."

"Yes, father, I don't be long now," and she began breaking sticks.

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While the kettle was boiling Tom told them that the pigs had broken out of their styes; they lamented the loss of their winter food, and Billy burst into tears on hearing that Peter — his friend, Peter, the house dog — had gone away, swimming after his kennel.

"Come, let us sit down to breakfast," Lupton said.

But they had hardly tasted their tea when Billy cried out:

"Father, father, the water be coming in under the door yonder. Take me on 'ee knee, father.. 'Ee did promise to take me to Harebridge. But if I drown I shall never see the circus."

Lupton took the little chap on his knee.

"There will be no danger of that. Grandfather will tell 'ee that this be nothing to the floods he knew when he was a little boy."

The water continued to come under the door, collecting where the asphalted floor had been worn, and they watched it rising out of these slight holes and coming towards the table. It came at first very slowly, and then suddenly it rose over their knees, and while Mrs. Lupton took the baby out of the cot the others searched for tea, sugar, bacon, eggs, coal, and candles.

"We shall be wanting all these things," Lupton said, “for the water may keep us upstairs for hours to come."

And they were very wet when they assembled in Lupton's bedroom. Lupton emptied his big boots out of the window and called on Tom to do the same. Liz wrung out her petticoats, and standing round the table they supped their tea and ate some slices of bread and butter. The baby had been laid asleep on the bed, and Daddy sat by the baby softening his bread in his mug of tea, mumbling to himself, his fading brain full of incoherent recollections.

"The folk in them fine houses will be surprised to see the water at the bottom of their parks," said Lupton, to break an oppressive silence.

"They be like to live so high up the water will never reach them," Mrs. Lupton answered.

" It h'aint like them to think for to send us 'elp."

"They 'aven't no boats up yonder," said Tom. "They be a good mile up from the river."

"Tom, dear, it's a pity your boat be gone, for you might have row’d me right into Harebridge."

"Yes, Liz, if you'd set still I might have taken 'ee through them currents, or as likely we might have gotten sucked under by an eddy, or a hole be knocked in the boat by some floating baulk."

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"I be lighter than Liz; would 'ee take me, Tom?" said Billy.

As the tops of the apple trees were still visible they judged the depth of the water to be about ten feet. Cattle passed the window, some swimming strong and well, others nearly exhausted. A dead horse whirled past, its poor neck stretched out lamentably, and they all laughed at the fox that floated so peacefully in the middle of a drowned hen-roost. The apples came by in great numbers; Billy forgot his fears in his desire to clutch some, and a little later they saw two great trees rolling towards the pointsman's box.

"There she goes!" cried Lupton. "And how she do swim! She'd put me into the quay at Harebridge as well as a steam packet."

There was nothing to do but to watch and wonder if the flood were rising. Liz was certain it was sinking, and pointing to a post she said there was no sign of it ten minutes before. Lupton was not so sure; and when the post disappeared, which it did a few minutes afterwards, there could be no hope at all that the flood was not still rising, and then every one began to wonder what the cause of the flood might be, and every one, except Daddy, waited for Lupton to speak. But he was loth to tell them that he could only understand the great rush of water if the embankments up yonder at the factories had broken and if that were so, "God 'help them!" As Lupton said these last words their faces grew paler, all except Billy, who returned innocently to his grandfather to ask if he didn't think the flood was as big now as the great flood of sixty years ago..

"It be a flood and a big one, but the biggest of all was eighty years ago, when my cradle was washed away down to Harebridge and stuck fast in the alder." And he began to tell a story of other children whose cradles had been carried just down to the sea, frightening everyone with his loquacity.

"Tom, 'as 'ee a bit of baccy to give to daddy to stop his jaw with?" said John Lupton.

Tom fumbled in his pockets,and when their eyes met each read his own thoughts in the other's face.

"We must be doing something, that's certain," said Tom. "But what shall we be doing?"

"Yes, we must be astirring," Lupton answered. And without another word he began to look about the room. "Now, if we 'ad but a few bits of timber we could make a raft. It's a pity that bedstead is of iron."

Tom, who had gone back to the window, cried suddenly: "Give a hand here, John, for 'ee was talking about a raft and blowed if I 'avn't gotten one."

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And looking over Tom's shoulder Lupton saw that he had caught a few planks tied together — a slender raft that somebody up yonder had launched as a last hope.

"Very likely so;" said Lupton, "anyhow it is ours. It might carry one of us."

"Yes, one of us might chance his life on it and bring back 'elp."

"That's right enough; it's an off-chance, but one of us had better risk it. Get along, lad, get along, and come back in a boat."

"Don't leave me, Tom," cried Liz; "let us be drowned together."

"Be 'ee mazed, lass?" said Lupton; "for Tom will manage right well on them planks, and he'll come back in a boat."

"No, father, no; I'd sooner die with Tom than live without him."

"'Ee aint the only one; 'ee'd better let him go or yonder church will see no wedding party next Monday. Tom, get astride of them planks at once."

"I think I'd better take this 'ere shutter with me;" and while it was lifted from its hinges Lupton lashed two broom handles together.

"Not much of a punt pole, but the best I can give, and maybe it will get 'ee out of the current."

But Liz held Tom back.

"Yes, Liz, Tom loves 'ee and that is why he must go: Come, girl, hands off. I don't want to be rough with 'ee, but Tom must take the risk of them planks. Now, Tom."

And away he went in a swirl, trying his best to reach bottom with his broom handles, but the raft rolled in the current, and Liz's last sight of her lover was when he attempted to seize some willow branches. The raft slid from under his feet, and he fell into the flood.

"He's gone from 'ee now, and we shall soon follow after if we don't bestir ourselves."

"It matters naught to me now," said Liz.

"I ne'er seen one mazed like 'ee afore."

"But I seed many; sixty years ago all the sweethearts were parted, and by the score. The jade got them, here a girl and there a boy, all but Daddy Lupton, for a wise woman said she shouldn't get 'im, and her word came true. I ain't afeard of 'er. I've seen 'er in worse tantrums than to-day.

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It's the rheumatics that I'm afeard of. These 'ere walls will be that damp, will be that…" The old man's voice died away in the whiteness of his beard.

At that moment three tiles fell from the roof; a large hole appeared in one of the walls, and they all felt that the house was falling about them bit by bit. But the immediate danger was from the great baulks that the current swept down. If any one of these were to strike the house, Lupton said, it must topple over into the Hood, and lest their luck shouldn't last Lupton took a sheet from the bed and climbed on to the roof.

"See a boat coming, Liz"? her mother asked, for Liz sat looking towards some willows as if she saw something.

"No boat will come for me. I want no boat to come for me."

"Come, Liz, come, Liz, I wouldn't have 'ee talk like that," her mother answered. The baby began to cry for the breast, and while suckling Mrs. Lupton raised her head to her husband sitting on the broken wall, but he waved the sheet so despairingly that she did not dare to ask him if a boat were coming.

"I can't sit up 'ere any longer," he said at last. "Let us do something. I don't mind what, so long as it keeps me from thinking."

"I think we'd better say our prayers," said Mrs. Lupton.

"Prayers? No, I can say no prayers. I'm too bothered; I want something that will keep me from thinking. The babbling of that water will drive us mad if we don't do something. Let us tell stories. Liz, don't sit there looking through the room or what's left of it. You read stories in the papers, can't you tell us one of them?"

Liz shook her head. He asked for the paper; she answered that it was downstairs, and begged that she might take his place on the corner of the wall and wave the sheet on the chance that a boat might be passing within hail.

"She don't pay no attention to what we're saying," said Lupton. "Now that Tom's gone I think she'd just as lief make away with herself… and what may 'ee be smiling at so heartily, father? 'Ee and the baby are the only two that can smile this morning."

"What be I smiling at? I heard 'ee speak just now of stories. I can zay one, lots of 'em."

"Then tell us a story, father, and a good one. It'll keep our thoughts from that babbling water."

"Well, I was just a-thinking. It be now seventy years ago…"

"Well, tell us about it."

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"I've said it was nigh seventy years ago; I was a growing lad at the time. I remember it as if it were yesterday. Me and Bill Slater was pals. At that time Bill was going to be married; I can see her now, a fine elegant lass, for all the world like our Liz. It had been raining for weeks and weeks — much the same kind of weather as we've had lately, only worse, and the river…"

"We don't want to hear about the river; we want to forget it. I suppose 'ee wants to tell us that Bill Slater and his lass was drowned? We don't want that sort of story, we wants a cheerful story with lots of happiness in it."

"I only knows stories about those that the river took — plenty of 'em, plenty of 'em. The jade didn't get me, for a wise woman said that she would never get me."

"Did she say, Daddy, that them that was with 'ee was safe too?"

Daddy was only sure of his own safety; and waking suddenly he said —- "I've 'eard John say that 'ee would banish thinking with something. Us better have some cards then. Cards will wake us up."

"The old chap's right," said Lupton. "Where be the cards? Be they downstairs too? Where's Liz?" Lupton climbed to her place, and after looking round he turned to those in the room and shook his head. "I'm afraid Liz has gone after her sweetheart."

"Very likely," said Daddy. "The jade· always gets them in the end. Where be the cards?"

"Yes, where be the cards?" Lupton answered almost savagely. "Be they downstairs, mother?"

"No, John; they be in the drawer of the table."

"Then, let's have them out. What shall we play? Half penny nap? Come, mother, and Billy too, and Daddy. Come, pull your chairs round. I gave 'ee sixpence yesterday, father. Find them out; 'ee can't have spent them, and mother have 'ee any coppers?"

"I've near a shilling in coppers. That will do for Billy and myself."

As there were only three chairs the table was pulled up to the bed where Daddy was sitting.

"Come, let us play, let us play." Lupton cried impatiently.

"I'm thinking of the baby," said Mrs. Lupton. "How unsuspecting he do sleep there."

"Never mind the baby, mother; think of your cards."

After playing for some time Lupton found he had lost threepence.

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“I never seed such luck," he exclaimed.

They played another round; again Lupton went nap and again he lost.

"Perhaps it will be them that loses that'll be saved,” he said, shuffling the cards.

"Father, I can't play," said Billy.

"Why can't you play, my boy? Aint mother a teaching ‘ee?"

"Yes, father, but I can't think of the cards; dead things be floating past the window. May I go and sit where I can't see them?"

"Yes, my boy, come and sit on my knee. Look over rny cards; but musn't tell them what I've gotten."

"Grandfather seems to be winning; he has gotten all the coppers, father.”

“Yes, my boy, grandfather is winning.”

"And what will he do with the winnings if he be drowned, father?"

"Grandfather don't think he will be drowned."

The old man chuckled, and turned over his coppers. His winnings meant a double allowance of tobacco and a glass of ale, and he thought of the second glass of ale he would have if he won again.

"Whose turn is it to play?” said Daddy.

"Mine," said Lupton, "and I'll go nap again."

"'E'll go nap again."

Lupton lost again, but this time instead of cursing his luck he remained silent, and at that moment the rush of water beneath their feet sounded more ominous than ever.

"I'll play no more," said Lupton. "I dunno what I be doing. There's naught in my poor head but the babbling of that water."

A tile slid down the roof, they sprang to their feet, and then they heard a splash. The old man played with his winnings and Billy began to cry.

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"It's sure and certain enough now that no help will come for us," said Mrs. Lupton. "Let's put away the cards and say our prayers, and 'ee might tell us a verse out of the Bible, John."

"Very well, let's have a prayer. Father, give over counting your money."

"Then no one be coming to save us," cried Billy. "I don't want to drown, father. I be too young to drown. Grandfather's too old and baby too young to think much about drowning. But if we drown to-day, father, I shall never see the circus."

"Kneel down, my boy; perhaps God might save us if we pray to Him."

"Oh, God, merciful Saviour, who has power over all things, save us. Oh, Lord, save us."

"Go on praying; mother," Lupton said, as he rose from his knees, and taking another sheet from the bed he climbed to the top of the broken wall; but he had hardly reached it when some bricks gave way and he fell backward and drowned. Mrs. Lupton prayed intermittently, and every now and then a tile splashed into the water.

"The way to manage 'er is to take 'er easy. She won't stand no bullying, and them giddy young folks will bully 'er, so she always goes for 'em."

Five or six tiles fell, the house rocked a little, and they could feel the water lifting the floor under their feet.

"Mother," said Billy; the child was so calm, so earnest in his manner, that he seemed suddenly to have grown older. "Mother, dear, tell me the truth — be I going to drown? We have prayed together, but God don't seem like saving us. I'm afraid, mother; baint you afraid? Father's gone and Liz's gone and Tom's gone, all except grandfather and us. Grandfather and the baby don't seem afraid. Mother, let me 'ave your 'and; 'ee won't lose hold of me."

Mrs. Lupton took the baby from the bed and looked at it; and when she looked up she saw the old man playing with the coppers he had won.

"Does drowning hurt very much, mother?"

The wall wavered about them, some bricks fell out of it; Billy was struck by one, struggled a little way, and fell through the floor. The floor broke again, and another piece of the roof came away, and Mrs. Lupton closed her eyes and waited for death. But death did not seem to come, and when she opened her eyes she saw that the floor had snapped at her feet and the old man was standing behind her.

"A darned narrow escape," he muttered. "As near as I have had yet."

"They're gone, they be all gone, all of them. Baby and all."

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"'Ee must have let her slip when the roof came in."

"I let the baby slip!" And looking down she saw the child floating among broken things.

"Well, that was a narrow escape," chimed the quaking voice of the octogenarian. "I'm sore afraid the house is in a bad way. I seed many like…"

By some great beams the south wall still held firm; and with it the few feet of floor on which they were standing.

"They be bound to send a boat afore long, or else the wise woman… Everything's gone — table, cards and a shilling in coppers."

"They're all gone; everything is gone."

"Yes, the jade's got 'em. She 'as brought near every one I knew at one time or the other."

Then the wild grief of the woman seemed to wake reason in Daddy's failing brain.

Her eyes were fixed on the bodies of her husband and child dashed to and fro and sucked under by the current, appearing and disappearing among the wreckage.

"I can't grieve like that; I ken grieve no more. I'm too old, and all excepting me baccy and the rheumatics are the same to me now."

"Saved!" cried a voice. "Give way, my lads, give way."

"Saved, and the others gone!" cried Mrs. Lupton, and as the boat approached from one side she flung herself into the flood from the other.

"Are you the only one left?" cried a man as the boat came alongside.

"Yes, the jade 'as got all the others. There, they be down there; and my daughter-in-law has just gone after them, jumped right in after them. But it was told by a wise woman that the jade should never get me, and her words comes true."

"Now then, old gent, let me get hold of you. Be careful where you step. Do nothing to risk your valuable life. There you are, safe, safe from everything but the rheumatics."

"They be very bad at times, and I must be careful of myself this winter."

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