



## THE FLOOD

By GEORG BRITTING

*To find really good short stories is one of the harder tasks of an editor. For a short story should have an interesting plot, a clear characterization of its heroes, some local color, and a clever, preferably unexpected ending. We are pleased to present one which possesses all these requirements.*

*Georg Britting is one of the outstanding younger German writers. That the author is German is plain from the last two paragraphs of the story. For where else . . . But read for yourself.—K.M.*

In the week before Christmas an unexpected thaw had set in. The green water of the Danube turned ochre, then brown, as the river rose, rose and rose. Bushes drifted downstream, scattered rabbits sitting shivering between the roots. The flood overflowed the banks and carried mud into the cellars. Boats splashed along the streets of the little town.

A short distance beyond the town two low houses stood close to each other beside the river. Jacob awoke at dawn. In his room on the ground floor there was a sheet of water. He roused his wife and told her to go to her parents in the town. He would try to save some important papers, jewelry, and suchlike, get some of the furniture into the attic, and then follow her. He would also notify Henry, their neighbor.

The woman went, and when she had disappeared in the mist he waded to the boat, tied up behind the house to a post which now barely stuck its round head out of the yellow flood. He sat down on the thwart, lit his

pipe, and watched with indifference the constant rise of the river.

In Henry's house nothing stirred. Far and wide there was only fog and water. The dark spots of the two houses looked like islands. When the river had risen to the first-floor windows, Jacob rowed the boat with slow strokes toward Henry's house and banged against the shutters. Henry, startled out of bed, looked out of the window, saw water, water yellow and eddying, and Jacob's boat come to the rescue. He was not too greatly alarmed. Riverbank dwellers must always be prepared for the element to attack them with wet tongues. After all, he was insured against damage, and it was easy to reach the town by boat.

He dressed hurriedly, swore a little at the outrageous river, and reappeared at the window, calling out to Jacob to bring the boat over to him so that he might get in.

Jacob, however, showed no signs of doing so. He fastened the boat to a near-by tree, whose leafless branches

reached toward the sky. Then he crossed his arms and said:

"I want you to admit, Henry, that you have betrayed me with my wife."

"Nonsense, Jacob," the other replied, "there is not a word of truth in what

you say. You have been listening to silly talk. Elsa is a pattern of virtues. She has never betrayed you by so much as a word or a look."

Jacob only smiled. The water continued

to rise. Already it was gushing through the windows of the first floor so that Henry had to move one floor higher. Jacob tied the chain of his boat to the top of the tree, which bent over creakingly. Henry talked long and urgently to Jacob:

"Don't be a fool, Jacob. You know Elsa is faithful to you. Why, I am willing to swear to it. I have never even thought of so much as touching her."

He went on and on, till Jacob interrupted him gruffly:

"It is no use, Henry. Now that you are facing death, don't you think it is time to tell the truth? You can't escape now. I shall wait till you drown like a cat. If you try to swim away, I'll hit you over the head with my oar."

The fog hung densely over the river. The near-by town was no longer visible. The yellow flood rolled and rolled and splashed against the house. If the water went on rising at this pace it must soon reach the roof. Henry's voice became more beseeching:

"For God's sake, Jacob, be reasonable. I'll admit, I have always liked Elsa very well. It's true, I even secretly gave her a kiss. But good

heavens, surely there's no harm in that. That isn't a crime, is it? After all, everybody has his weak moments. That's nothing for you to get so mad about. Oh, come on, Jacob, let me into the boat now and row me to town."

Jacob smiled grimly. Henry began again:

"All right, once, but—I swear by all that's holy—only once, I did betray you with Elsa. You know how women are, always after a new man. They're like children, women are, always wanting everything. Of course, being your friend I should have known better, I shouldn't have done it."

Jacob had listened calmly to this confession. He toyed with the oars. He rocked the boat. Henry went on:

"You are my friend, Jacob, aren't you? I'd better admit it. It was more than once. The temptation, you know. We are all only human, aren't we? But it certainly wasn't as often at you think. Come on now, forgive me and let me get in the boat."

"It's no use, Henry, you're going to die. You might as well give up all hope. In an hour the water will be up there. I am going to stay and see you gurgle and die."



The man imprisoned in his own house resorted to pleading, begging, wailing. Jacob no longer paid any attention to him, but watched the waves slapping against the bow of the boat as if that were the only thing that

interested him. He had now stopped listening to the adulterer who began to weep and cry, then to curse and scream.

Finally the prisoner stopped his abuse, and the two men stared at each other for several minutes without moving. Henry seemed to see an irrevocable sentence in the eyes of his judge. Suddenly Henry stepped back from the window into the room and disappeared. A quarter of an hour must have passed, and it appeared to Jacob as if the silent house were trembling under the pressure of the water.

Then Henry appeared again at the window. He was wearing the uniform of the infantry regiment in which he had served, in which he had gone through the war—the full dress uniform and steel helmet. Medals swung on his chest, clinking softly, then hanging silently. He had been a sergeant and

so had buckled on his sword. Without saying a word he leaned against the window frame. Not deigning to look at him, he acted as if Jacob did not exist, as if he were thin air. His face wore the expression of a soldier bravely facing death without fear or trembling.

Jacob looked at him dumfounded. The martial figure at the window did not move. The mighty river flowed on. Then Jacob unfastened the chain from the tree. He did not know whether to laugh or cry, or whether he should feel admiration for his opponent. He rowed the boat to the window. The soldier saluted stiffly, got in, sat down on the bench in the stern like a guest of honor, like a fine gentleman, like a general, and Jacob rowed him quickly and silently over the foaming yellow water to the town.

