

CHAPTER I

RAIN

IT RAINED all through October. Everything in the garden dripped. The surrounding hills were misty, the valley was dismal, the cows had trodden into a morass the lane that runs by the garden of my English cottage. I carted barrow loads of wet leaves and dumped them by an incinerator that refused to incinerate. The gardener walked about with an old sack over his shoulders, and only when the water dripped off the brim of his hat on to his nose did he succumb to the weather. To-morrow, we all said, putting faith in the law of averages, it must be fine. It could not rain for ever. Surely the sun would emerge to smile over October's gold, to give us that last revelation of beauty before the wintry sleep fixed the pinched face of Nature in a pretence of death?

But not a ray emerged. The leaves fell from the beech trees, the Chiltern Hills were dull and soddened, the rain drummed on the old roof, it made channels in the garden path, it invaded the threshold of the cottage. To-morrow, and to-morrow, and the next day, it rained and rained. Then the Thames rose. The newspapers began to publish flood pictures. A stout lady in Maidenhead put on a bathing costume and swam to her grocer's. The weekly film news showed us families being removed by punts from their

homes, all surprisingly cheerful as they floated through a wet world.

In the third week of rain, when even the landlord of *The Golden Ball*, an obstinate optimist, admitted it was 'trying,' I received a cable, from a friend in mid-Atlantic, informing me that in a few days he would be at Pilgrim Cottage. He lived amid acres of orange groves in the middle of Florida. Six years previously I had visited his home. I ate my Christmas dinner in a room with blinds drawn against a dazzling sun, and admired his mother's collection of nearly a hundred varieties of azaleas all coming into gorgeous bloom. We had played tennis under arc lights at midnight and found it rather warm, and bathed on Daytona Beach in a sea which was all that an English summer resort pretends it is in August.

A dripping telegraph boy handed me the damp cable announcing my friend's visit. As the boy closed the garden gate, shaking the ivy porch, a sudden shower bath made him use language his employers would not have transmitted. What a time and scene for a visitor from Florida! I took comfort in the knowledge that it could not rain until he came, and while he stayed.

But it did. It rained heavier, it never paused. It defeated the wind-screen wiper on the car when I fetched my guest from the station.

"I see England's keeping its reputation," he said, smiling.

"What do you mean?" I asked, knowing well what he meant.

"It rained when I left England five years ago and——"

"You surely don't suggest it's been raining ever since," I said, with assumed resentment. "It must rain sometime. To-morrow——"

Somehow the lie that followed had a ring of sincerity. To-morrow it could not possibly rain.

But it did. The rain streamed down the window panes, it ran in a torrent off the garage roof, and the damp morning paper exposed the whole truth and nothing but the rain to my friend. We did not go out that day. We went out the next day, and came in again, quickly.

"This really is most unusual!" I said, passing the toast at breakfast on a third morning, as the view of the woods opposite came and went under a streaming veil of water.

"Why don't you come to Florida, and get some sunshine?" asked my friend, by now quite convinced that this was a normal condition.

"Oh, we do get sunshine here—even in winter," I replied. "I'd like to come, of course, but I've got a book to write."

"Write it in sunshine—why not a sequel to *Gone Afield*—call it *Gone Sunwards*?"

"Sequels are always impossible—no, I really can't get away. Besides, I enjoy the winter—curtains drawn, blazing fires, feet on the hearth——"

"And 'flu in the head," added my friend, cruelly. "Pack your bag and come. Half the fun in being an author is that you can work anywhere."

I fell back on the obvious excuse.

"I can't afford it. The Atlantic's too expensive."

"Think what you'll save in winter clothes and doctors' bills and coal and heating here. Think of swimming in a warm blue sea, of picnics on the lakes, of palm trees in moonlight, of orange groves in blossom, open windows, birds, warm winds, fireflies, crooning——"

"I hate anything that croons," I retorted hastily, beginning to feel really depressed.

"Very well—I was merely quoting the Miami advertisements. I'll try to stop the crooning, but just now half a million are crooning a song called *Moon over Miami*."

"It's no use. I've got to stay here and work."

"Then you won't visit us?" he asked.

"No."

And after that he tantalised me no more.

It continued to rain. At the end of one week it stopped, once, and began again.

"Let's go to London," I said, in desperation, looking out on the dripping garden and the dripping gardener. The newspapers had ceased to herald the wettest winter in fifty years. Even the worms had turned, driven to the surface, and lay white and inert on the paths. Bowed branches of Michaelmas daisies littered the depressed flower beds. The cottage, whitewashed in the spring, had not a vestige of colour left. Was it possible that I had written three books full of the pleasures of the rustic life? My loyalty to the country began to waver.

People were already leaving for world cruises. The papers were filled with advertisements luring one to loaf in Honolulu, or seek summer in South Africa. I should retreat to London, of course, but I felt cheated of the autumnal procession which crowns the gardener's year. No fires rose from my neighbour's garden as the discarded raiment of summer was reduced to ashes. No apples lay stored along the landing and in the roof. The spring had opened with a tragic frost that destroyed all the fruit blossom, the autumn had closed in a ceaseless downpour. The Jeremiahs were already prophesying a long, hard winter; the coal merchant considerably asked if I was well prepared. The tortoise

busied himself by the rockery, was washed out, and in disgust crawled lethargically into the coalhouse and took up a dangerous lodging near the chopping-block.

In the first week of November my friend and I moved into my London rooms. It still rained when he left, a week later, for Florida. He tried tempting me with an account of a special guest suite he had built in the garden, over the garage "where you can do just what you like, and not see us unless you wish." I declined this magnanimous offer, and repressed memories of sunsets over a hundred palm-fringed lakes, the scent of orange blossom, the sunny days, the warm nights. I had work to do. "And it can't go on like this," I protested again, as my friend's boat-train drew out of gloomy Waterloo into the wet world beyond.

It went on, and from a city of mackintoshes, umbrellas, and shining pavements I returned to my cottage, closed fast the door, switched on the lights, piled logs on the fire, and sat down to my desk, defying the damp and the depression. Christmas drew near. Miserable little boys came and whined at my dark door, relating mournfully the news of those shepherds 'all seated on the ground,' and, opening the door to send them away, their wet bedraggled appearance touched me to compassion, and to part with sixpence—a fatal compassion, for the news went round the neighbouring hamlets that I dispensed sixpences to caterwaulers, and night after night I had to hear repeatedly of those shepherds all seated on the ground. If it had been English ground instead of Judæan ground, what rheumatism they would have had, I reflected.

One is not popular in the country in winter. Few of one's friends are then smitten with the sudden desire to visit one,

which moves them in the summer, or even in early spring, if it is sunny. But one week-end two friends descended upon me, though one was cruel enough to inform me, gloatingly, that he was leaving soon to spend Christmas in Athens. I immediately had a vision of him drinking Chian wine on a sun-drenched terrace looking out to Mount Hymettus and the temple crowned Acropolis, lovely against the violet evening sky. But my other guest killed all envy by saying, "Athens at Christmas! How awful! I was there last Christmas, and it snowed heavily. There was the bitterest wind I've ever known, and you couldn't get a hot bath in the hotel, and everyone had influenza."

My guests left on the Monday morning, the one bound for Athens, the other, in a few days, bound for Jamaica. These departures made me restless. A little lonely, I asked a cheerful lady of my acquaintance to dinner. She was always bright with gossip, had a permanently happy disposition, and loved food. But a well thought out menu was rudely dashed by a servant at the other end of the telephone informing me that Miss X had just left for Austria.

"Whatever for?" I asked, irritably and unreasonably.

"For winter sports, sir," came the answer.

I put down the receiver and stared out at a wet wretch delivering more coal, and then went back to my desk, where, ironically, I was deep in a chapter describing a yacht sailing into the blue bay of an island in the Ægean Sea. Such are the pleasures of the imagination.

It was dark at four o'clock that afternoon. The budgerigar who flies about my room went to sleep on the lamp shade, and opened a dreamy eye when the tea-tray came in. I turned on the radio, in a mood when any kind of noise was welcome.

*Moon over Miami,
Shine on my love and me,
That we may stroll
Beside the roll
Of the roaring sea—*

It was crooned by one of those castrato-voiced gentlemen who make fabulous sums arousing the unsatisfied passions of poor typists. The sickly rubbish annoyed me, but I had to listen. Miami, Florida. My friend was back there now.

Moon over Miami, shine on— It was drivel, but it was true drivel, nevertheless. I recalled a swift moonlit scene years ago. I had crossed over from Cuba, and my boat arrived at Key West as a blood-red sunset flushed the great expanse of shining water, and the vast canopy of the sky. Then the train had started its journey northwards, over the Florida Keys into the blue dusk. Sometime after midnight I had raised the blind of my sleeping compartment and peered out. Silver water shone all around me, and feathery palm trees, lofty and black against the moonlight, threw their long shadows across the white seashore.

I turned off the radio which had recalled this nocturnal vision, to find that the afternoon mail had been placed on my desk. There were some letters from abroad, letters from South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, the last containing seeds of the *renga venga*, or New Zealand lily, for my garden.

There was a letter also, with a Miami postmark. Evidently Miami was on the air and in the mail. Had some reader of *Gone Rustic* sent me the seeds of a rare Floridian flower to join my League of Nations plot? I tore open the envelope. The letter was not from a stranger, but from some old

friends who had a winter home in Coconut Grove, near Miami. Fifteen years ago they had collected me from a large hotel in Chicago, where I was a stranger, marooned in a wintry blizzard in a city that seemed the bleakest and most frightening on earth. I was lonely, homesick, and exhausted after a whirlwind tour that had swept me in and out of fifteen strange lecture halls and beds in fifteen consecutive days. Somewhere, in the wilds of Indiana, a kind soul had given me a letter of introduction to someone in Chicago, in the casual, kind manner of American hospitality. Thus it came about that a tired young Englishman was collected from a strange hotel and taken forthwith into a charming Chicago home, and also into the friendship of the three H's, father, mother, and daughter. Whenever I had returned to America there had been a happy reunion, and, on one occasion, a long summer tour down through Maryland, the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama. Six years had passed since I had seen that happy family, now wintering within three hundred miles of my friend the orange grower at Orlando.

To the sound of the rain trickling into the water butt outside, I read another appeal to pass the winter in Florida. There seemed to be a conspiracy growing around me.

I put the letter aside, dismissed the temptation it contained, sat down at my desk, and found I could not work. In a moment of weakness I got out the map and measured the distance between Orlando and Coconut Grove, Miami. The idea of paying two visits in Florida appealed to me. The idea of getting away from this incessant rain, this damp climate, this threat of a long, dreadful winter, grew more insistent. I fought it down and advanced reason upon reason against surrender to this temptation.

The longing for sunshine dwells in the heart of every Englishman, it is the weak spot in the most Spartan temperament. Six grey weeks of rain had brought low my powers of resistance. I reviewed the obstacles to a surrender to this growing temptation to make one wild dash into sunshine. I had a book to finish; it would cost too much; it was a symptom of weakness; and it would entail crossing the Atlantic Ocean in winter.

This last objection was the strongest of all. I am the world's worst sailor. I had crossed the Atlantic five times in winter, and had touched the lowest depths of human misery. True, it was only twenty-eight hours by train from New York to Miami, but it was at least five days of sea-sickness from Southampton to New York, as I well knew from sad experience.

Having carefully reviewed all these considerations, I sat down and wrote a grateful and regretful letter of thanks to my friends in Coconut Grove. The very address was seductive—Leafy Way, Coconut Grove, Miami, Florida. I stuck down the envelope and stamped it. Then, looking at my watch, I found it was too late for the collection from the village post office. To catch the post the letter would have to be taken into Henley, two miles away. It was dark and pouring with rain. There was no real urgency about the letter. I propped it up on the mantelpiece, a reminder that it must go in the morning.

Several times that evening the envelope caught my eye. Leafy Way, Coconut Grove, Miami, Florida. Coconut Grove—that meant palm trees, sunshine, hot sand, blue water—

*Moon over Miami,
Shine on my love and me—*

That ridiculous jingle was running through my head again. Annoyed with myself, I turned round the envelope, face against the wall. Then I picked up my pen and began work again. But not for long.

*While shair-puds watched their flocks by night
All seated on the—*

More wretched carollers were piping at the door, unquenched by the rain and the bitter cold. In exasperation I half rose from my chair, when I heard my housekeeper go to the door and shoo them away. Poor little beggars. All that hoarseness in all that rain in the hope of gaining a few pence! I got up and went into the kitchen, seeking my housekeeper.

“Send them away, but give ’em sixpence first,” I said.

“But, Mr. Roberts, it’s the sixpence that brings them here,” she protested.

“I suppose it is—but it’s Christmas time,” I replied weakly.

“I’d like to shake their mothers—letting them go out on a night like this, raining cats and dogs! And they give me the creeps with their dismal hymns,” said my housekeeper.

“Ask the next lot if they know *Moon over Miami*.”

“Moon over what, Mr. Roberts?” she asked, mystified.

“Oh, nothing—it’s only a joke,” I explained, weakly, and then hurriedly retreated to my study. The carol singers had seated shepherds on the brain, and clearly I was getting Miami on the brain.

Once more I sat down to my desk and laboured to move my yacht, with twelve characters, across the Ægean Sea into the next chapter.