

PINELAND

By Marjory Stoneman Douglas

ILLUSTRATED BY ALBIN HENNING



"Once When the Rains Were Bad I Waded in From Goulds With Water Up to My Waist and a Jack of Irish Potatoes on My Shoulder"

LARRY GIBBS was thankful that the roughness of the road took all his attention, because he had no idea what to say to a woman whose son has just been hanged. But she was alone beside him in the front seat of the car. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her cheap black skirt covering her bony knees and the worn toes of her shoes to which still clung some particles of sand from around Joe McDevitt's grave. The heavy black veil which muffled her hat and her face gave off the acid smell of black dye. Her hands in black cotton gloves with flabby tips that were too long for her fumbled with a clean folded handkerchief in her lap.

All around them the white brilliance of the Florida noon poured down upon the uneven road from the burial place, caught on the bright spear points of palmettos and struck into nakedness the shabby houses among stumps of pine trees of this outskirts of Miami. The light and the hot wind seemed whiter and hotter for the figure of Sarah McDevitt in her mourning.

It was Jack Kelley, the man who had turned state's evidence on the Pardee gang case, who had told Larry he would loan him an automobile if he would take Sarah McDevitt home. It was the same Jack Kelley who had started the fund to provide Joe McDevitt's body with decent burial. He had seen to it that his own figure had a prominent place in the newspaper photographs of the grave, which next morning would assure all Dade County that the Pardee gang, including the McDevitts, was at last broken up, either by being driven from Florida or doing endless terms in prison camps, like George McDevitt; or like Joe here, made safe for Southern progress with a stretch of rope, a pine coffin and a few feet of Florida marl.

"Go on now," Jack Kelley had said, pushing at Larry with large, firm pushes. "There's a story in Sarah McDevitt yet. The last of her boys gone and she going home to sit and listen to her pine trees, see? A nice little front-page story, see? And you might just mention the canned goods I've put in the back of the car for her. Enough to last her a month. Here you are, Sarah McDevitt. Larry Gibbs will take you home, see?"

Larry wondered miserably if she were crying in behind that stuffy veil. He had not seen her face yet. He had never seen her before.

She had not come to the trial, although he wondered a little why Joe McDevitt's lawyer had not brought her in for her effect on the jury. He thought of Joe McDevitt as he had been then, lounging, copper-haired, a sleek reddish animal, his veins crammed with healthy life. He had not shown much interest even when the facts about the bank robbery and the cashier's death were made damningly evident.

Now Joe McDevitt was dead. It had made a tremendous impression on Larry. It was his first big court case since he had been on the paper. He had written home to his mother that he was seeing the real bedrock of life

at last. He pictured his mother reading it in her breakfast room in Brookline, turning the pages of his letter with that little look of amused horror on her distinguished face. ~~and that he would not be obliged to come in close contact with miserable creatures in jails.~~

He had written with affected carelessness about interviewing McDevitt the man-killer, but secretly he was thankful that he had not had to cover the hanging this morning. The other court reporter had done that. But this business of taking home the mother was almost as bad. It made him feel perfectly rotten. She was so quiet.

"That road," she said to him suddenly, and he flushed and jerked the car around on the way she had pointed. He was taken completely by surprise that her voice could be so clear and firm.

"This is—this is the Larkins Road, isn't it?" he asked hastily to prevent the silence from forming again. "I didn't know it was surfaced yet."

But she said nothing, and he continued to stare forward at the road paralleling the shine of tracks, the shine and glitter of palmettos on the other side. The sky ahead was steely and remote, and it made his eyes ache. A corner of her veil snapped outside the car. Every once in so often her hat joggled forward over her forehead and she pushed it back and wiped her face with the wad of her handkerchief. He was somehow sure that it was not tears she wiped.

He turned to ask her if she would not like to have him stop somewhere and get her a glass of water, and saw for the first time that her skin was pale and clammy with heat. Her mouth, with the deep soft wrinkles on it of an old woman, was half open and panting. But as he spoke she closed her lips in a tight line and looked at him straight out of faded gray eyes within faded lashes. There was nothing feeble in her glance. She pulled off her hat abruptly and her thin gray hair blew against the brown skin of her forehead.

When they had passed by the stores and railway station of Larkins she began slowly to take off her black gloves. She rolled them into hard balls, working and working at them sightlessly until he thought she would never let them alone. Her hands were curiously like the look in her eyes, vigorous in spite of the blotched brown skin stretched over the large-boned knuckles.

"What did Jack Kelley think he was going to get out of sending me home with a lot of canned goods?" she asked suddenly.

"Why—I don't know," Larry said. "He—I think he was just—I mean I imagine he wanted to show you he was sorry that you—that your —"

"Huh!" she said, and her voice was dryly deliberate. "Any time Jack Kelley spends money you can bet he knows right well where he's going to get something for it. I guess maybe he figured you'd put something in the paper about it."

Larry was always sharply conscious when his fair skin reddened. "But, Mrs. McDevitt, I wouldn't write anything you wouldn't want me to write. I —"

"I could tell you to write something Jack Kelley wouldn't want you to write, about the time he tried to do me out of my homestead. I guess he wouldn't relish that much."

"When was that?" Larry leaped eagerly to the question. He felt easier, now that she was talking. The only sense of strain of which he was aware was the slow dry way she talked, as if her tongue were swollen and sticky. "Tell me about that, won't you?"

"Oh—it wasn't much. Nothing to put in the paper. He just wasn't so smart's he thought he was. It was one time about two years after I come down on my land here. McDevitt's mother up in Vermont wrote me that George was awful sick. I'd been working in Miami, waiting on table like I did in the six months they let you live off your homestead, and it was time I went back on it, but I got permission from the land agent to leave long enough to go north and look after my children."

"In Jacksonville I met this Jack Kelley between trains, that I'd seen coming into the restaurant time and again, and the minute he saw me he knew I was supposed to be on my land. 'Well, Sarah McDevitt,' he says to me. 'So the pineland was too much for you, was it?'"

"When you see me giving up my pineland you can have it yourself, Jack Kelley," I says to him, and thought no more of it. But don't you believe it but that man turned right around and come back to Miami and started to file a counterclaim against my property. And now he thinks he can fool me with canned goods. Jack Kelley. Huh!"

"But he didn't get your land, did he?"

"Of course he didn't, the big fool. He didn't have a chance. I had my permission right enough, and the day after he'd filed the claim he come down to look at my house, and a good neighbor of mine that see him coming fired off a six-shooter in the air, and he said Jack Kelley ran like a whitehead. And up in Miami Mr. Barnes that owned the restaurant told me he'd go to court himself to see I kept my place. He said Jack Kelley'd ought to be run out of the county for trying to take a woman's land from her. I don't mean you should put that in the paper, though."

Larry pondered regretfully the news value of that story. But she was quite right that he couldn't print it. The paper wouldn't stand for it, and besides it was libel.

They were running past pineland now, and he turned and stared at the passing ranks. They were like no pine trees he had ever seen in his life, these Caribbean pine. Their high bare trunks, set among palmetto fans that softened all the ground beneath them, rose up so near the road that he could see the soft flakes of color of their scaly bark, red and brown and cream, as if patted on with a thick brush. Their high tops mingled gray-green branches, twisted and distorted as if by great winds or

something stern and implacable in their own natures. Their long green needles were scant, letting the sky through. They were strange trees, strange but beautiful. The brilliance of the sun penetrated through their endless ranks in a swimming mist of light. They were endlessly alike, endlessly monotonous, and yet with an endless charm and variety.

Every tree held its own twist and pattern; every tree, even to the distant intermingled brown of trunks too far away to distinguish, was infinitely itself. Sometimes the pine woods came so near the road he could smell their sunny resinous breath. Sometimes they retreated like a long, smoky, green-frothed wall beyond house lots and grapefruit groves or open swales of saw grass or beyond cleared fields where raw stumps of those already destroyed stood amid the blackness of a recent burning. Against the horizon their ranks rushed cometlike and immobile into the untouched west. He felt the comprehension of them growing upon him—the silence of their trunks, the loveliness of their tossed branches, the virginity of their hushed places, in retreat before the surfaced roads and filling stations, the barbecue stands and signboards of the new Florida.

"They're wonderful, aren't they, the pines?" he said abruptly. "There's something beautiful and fresh about them, different from any trees I've ever seen."

The woman beside him took a great deep breath, as if what he said had released something in her.

"I remember the first time I went to see my place," she said. "Twenty years ago. In those days the nearest road was six miles away. You could take a horse and carriage from Miami to a place near Goulds where the road branched. Then you'd have to walk across country to where my land began. It wasn't my land then, though. The land agent had it surveyed and told me where the boundary stood was. The palmetto was deeper than it is now, but I was younger and nothing was too much for me. When I'd walked a ways through the palmetto under those pines and come to the place where they said would be good for a clearing, I just stood still and listened. I don't know how long. It was so still you could hear little noises a long ways off, like a bird rustling up on a branch or an insect buzzing.

"The tops of the trees were higher up than these here, and they didn't move any. The light was all soft and kind of bright, and yet green and dim too. Those trees were the quietest things I ever see. It did you good just to feel them so quiet, as if you'd come to the place where everything began. I couldn't hardly believe there was places outside where people were afraid and worried. I just—I tell you I just started crying, but not to hurt. I never was one for crying, but this was just good easy tears, the way you cry when you're so happy you don't believe it's true."

Larry hardly dared to speak, keeping his hands tight on the wheel and his eyes on the road. Yet when she continued to maintain the silence into which she had fallen he ventured, "What made you come down here homesteading in the first place, Mrs. McDevitt?"

"I was in the freeze years ago, up in Orange County." Her reply came with a little effort, as if she had lost her present self in a sturdy dark-haired woman, wiping her eyes all alone among silent acres of pineland. "Eh, law!" she sighed. "That was a long time. McDevitt bought an orange grove and we were froze out."

"Tell me about that," Larry insisted. Presently she went on speaking, with her chin on her breast and her eyes staring forward at the road racing and racing toward them, between the straight gleaming rails and the dusty palmettos, the few pines, half dying, with patent-medicine signs tacked to them, that followed this part of the road. She talked as if it were as easy as thinking—easier.

"McDevitt would have it that we mustn't sell the oranges until the season was later and the prices better, although I told him to sell. The fruit was coloring wonderful that winter. 'Ninety-four and five. In those days in Orange County the orange trees were tall and dark and glossy, on strong thick trunks. When you walked in an orange grove the dark leaves met overhead and you walked on bare brown earth in a kind of solid shadow, not like the pines that strain the light through clear and airy. Up in the dark branches you could see the oranges in clusters, growing gold color like there was sun on them. I never saw fruit like ours that winter. It seemed like the branches would break with it. Then came the big freeze. There never was one like it before and there never has been since."

"That was about the last difference McDevitt and I had." Larry felt a pricking in the back of his neck at the even depth of hatred in her voice, the first naked emotion she had shown. "He was a smooth one, a smooth, smiling, hateful man, with easy ways and eyes boring in for the weak place in you. It was what made him furious, not finding mine. 'I'll be stronger than you are,' I'd say to myself often and often. 'And stiller and more of a man. You see if I won't.' That was even as soon as after George was born. I'd grit my teeth and bear that look in his eyes until he'd fling off and leave me a week or two for spite. We come down to Orange County from Vermont state, where his mother was. He got this orange grove with money my own mother left me, but I knew he'd never be one for holding it. So I held it."

The car dipped and rose on the swinging levels of the road. The sun was beginning to crawl down from its zenith and the burning white of the sky was turning a faint flower-petal blue. The wind from the invisible sea to eastward came to them in steady, freshening gusts.

"Turn here," she said. "That winter he had a great beard that was the color of the oranges, and he'd sit around barefooted on the porch of the shack

we had and comb it. Joe was—Joe was a year old then." Her tongue thickened as she spoke the name for the first time. Larry heard the sticky parting of her lips. The car was running almost silently on a dirt road in the shadow of pines that seemed stronger and more dense than those by the main highway.

"I was a thick stumpy woman then, and the heat behind all those trees there in the middle of Florida was like a tight hand over your lungs. But I'd leave the baby and little George on a mattress in the breeze-way between the two rooms of the house and go out to see that the nigras were working. McDevitt wouldn't ever. He'd sit there smiling, with those eyes over his beard and never sweated. The heat was terrible. That's what made the fruit ripen early. I was wild with nerves at it, but I wouldn't let McDevitt know. Only when he come home from Orlando and said he'd got an offer to sell the crop on the trees for ten thousand, only he'd decided not to, that night I had to go out and walk up and down the road that had a place where there wasn't any orange trees. That night I thought I'd choke with orange trees."

"Up around the house the shadow of them was black and thick, and the smell of the new bloom that was coming here and there up among the yellowing fruit sickened you. There was a starlight that fell wet and glittery like knives on the leaf edges. The next day McDevitt went off somewhere to spite me because I wanted him to sell, and left me alone. I'd never let him guess how afraid I was to be alone. I guess that's why I married him when he come along when ma died. Or maybe he guessed and thought I'd beg him to take me away."

"He would have liked me to beg him to. But I never let on that my knees were like string to see him go. He turned at the gate and smiled at me over that orange-colored beard with his stone-white teeth and his eyes that were like wires boring into you, and I shut my mouth tight and let him look. So he stopped smiling and went, and I was there with the two children and four nigras living down a ways in a shack in the grove, and the days got hotter. I would of sold the crop, only I couldn't find the man that made the offer. But everybody in Orlando, at the

bank and everywhere, said to hold on, because prices were going up. Then one day it begun to get cold.

"It came on in the morning, and by afternoon it was so cold the children shivered, and I had to put two or three extra shirts on them. In all the groves up and down the road they began to light fire pots and start bonfires to keep the oranges from feeling it. You could smell the smoke and the blossoms in the chilly air. The sky was heavy and gray-looking and there wasn't any wind, and the smoke

drifted and hung between the long dark rows of trees. But still it kept getting colder. Late that afternoon I went out and stopped the nigras from lighting any more fire pots. I could see it wasn't going to do any good. I told them to cut down a couple of old trees to keep themselves warm in their houses that night and had them bring me some of the wood too.

"Then it got dark sudden and I gave the children some bread and milk and put them to bed with all the bedclothes over them, and I put a shawl around my knees and one over my shoulders and sat close to the stove and fed it with orange wood. All night long I sat there and it kept getting colder. About midnight I could tell it was freezing outside, because the trees begun to crack and snap. Then pretty soon you could hear

"All I Remember Was the Heat on My Face and a Kind of Wildness in Me to Get That Fire Out, No Matter What Happened or What it Cost"

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thumps on the ground where the oranges were freezing and falling off. I set there and heard them and knew that every cent I had in the world but two dollars was being frozen up. Then some more oranges would thump down.

"Next morning when I unbolted my front door and looked out the ground was all covered with frost that was melting in the sun, and everywhere you looked the edges of the leaves were blackened, and on the ground carloads and carloads of oranges were scattered. The crop was ruined. Every orange was hurt. And all the way into Orlando and all over Orange County and all the way up to Jacksonville it was the same way. It wasn't just me that was ruined. The whole state was. I've often wondered why we had to get caught in the one big freeze Orange County ever had."

"Well, when McDevitt heard how things were, he told a man that was coming to Orlando to tell me that I could have the grove. He said he was tired of oranges anyway and thought he would go to Texas and I probably wouldn't see him any more. So there I was, I was scared so then I thought I didn't hardly know what to do, but what McDevitt did, put the ginger in me I needed."

"Maybe he thought he'd find the weak place in me that way, but it made me mad enough to do anything. So then I found that the trees weren't dead, only the fruit. There was maybe a chance to save next year's bloom. So I went into the bank at Orlando and borrowed some money to keep going on, and almost everybody else that wasn't too discouraged done the same thing. Things looked bad, but they weren't too bad."

"Until early in February when the second freeze came. The sea had begun to break with the waves forced beyond its time. People were getting real cheerful, like people get in a fruit country, living on next year's promise, and Orlando looked prosperous. And then the second freeze came. I sat up all night again and listened to the crackling of the boughs. There wasn't any oranges to thump down, but somehow now it made it all the worse. You couldn't hear anything but the crackling and snapping of wood, but you could feel the chill that meant that next year's hopes were dying."

"My fire went out and I was chilled through, and yet even when it came daylight and the sun struggled in the window I kept sitting there by the stove, not daring to go and look. There wasn't a sound outside, nobody going in by the road, and the nigra not making any noise at all. I just sat there all huddled up until little Joe woke up and ran and opened the door and told me to look."

"You never saw anything like it in your life. It was the abomination of desolation. It wasn't only the leaves were black and shriveled and fallen and the new bloom gone. The trees themselves were frozen stiff and the sap had frozen and then split the trees down to the roots; and then they lay, looking like an earthquake or a tornado had hit them. Every tree was killed, every one of them, down to the roots. And when the sun was hot and the warmth was coming back all the country smelled of rotteness. People went around with their mouths shut spoke but couldn't smile, and they could look with their eyes, but it was like they weren't looking at anything."

"It was like death. Business was stopped. All the banks were closed. Then the people began to go away. They could have stood it without money, but they couldn't stand it without the hope of their trees that they'd worked so hard over and put their last cent in. They were standing on the blackened rotting groves and they left their houses wide open and maybe food on the table and bread in the oven, and in a week it was like everybody had died. Some went back to places they'd come from in the

North or the old South, and some went to Texas and Oklahoma."

"But some of the young men that didn't have all the spirit taken out of them were talking about going farther south, way down in South Florida that nobody thought was fit to live in on account of swamps, down to this new place Miami on the coast where they were bringing the railroad. These men said that maybe down there they could start new orange groves, and there was gov'ment land you could homestead."

"If I hadn't been so mad with McDevitt I don't see how I could have done it, but I began to think if a man could take up a homestead maybe I could, and then I'd put a grove in and show him I was a smarter man than he was, if I was a woman. So I wrote to his mother that lived in Vermont state and told her just how it was, and she wrote back she was sorry McDevitt had been so mean and she'd take the children for a while. She was a good, kind woman and I guess McDevitt took after his father. There was some people going back to Vermont state from Orlando that could tell me more about it. I don't know how I took up the land. Perhaps I made a mistake. There's plenty of people has made good money growing oranges in Orange County since then. Gosh here."

"There was a struggling grove of grapefruit at the left, which presently revealed a road more like a path. Up this, in answer to her hand, Larry turned. The weeds were long under the trees. Beyond that was an unweeded cleared land that may have been used to grow vegetables. But beyond that still the pines began again, pressing down until almost to the faint roadways, rising easily on one side and ahead, larger and more lately than any Larry had yet notated. The trees were thick and the distance was smoky with crowding trunks. Superb trees, they seemed to be the very ancestors and originals of all the others they had passed. The house stood in a small clearing, perhaps the half acre prescribed by the Government for homesteaders. It was made of pine logs and there was a well beside it and a small garden. When he stopped the car Larry found himself listening intently. It was as she had said. You could hear only little noises faint and far away. When she was walking from the car to the house steps, stiffly, with her black hat and veil trailing from her hand and her heavy black skirt bunched up as she had been sitting on it, Larry asked, "Where do you want me to take these canned goods, Mrs. McDevitt?"

"First he thought she had not heard him, but the next step she turned and looked back at him and her thin lips stretched in a mirthless smile. "You take those things back to Jack Kelley," she said, and she said, "Some day, some day, I'll push on his face must have reached to her, for she said, "Come and set down, don't you want to? I'm going to have me a cup of coffee. You've been—you're a right kind young man and it's a long ways back."

When she came out again with a pot of coffee in her hand, and cups, Larry had been sitting on the porch steps, thinking of the pine trees. Their airy quiet was a healing, as if he were standing on the shore of feeling sure that if he could only be still enough himself, hands still, eyes still, heart still, perhaps he would enter into the knowledge of something deep and hidden and wonderful as the sea. There was a moment, a threshold of a slow moment of revelation, a moment for which being had been created. The feeling went when he heard her behind him, and he stretched and looked about him with a feeling of good happiness. The long light of afternoon slanted through brown trunks across the grass of the clearing. Beyond the tossing green of pine tops the sky was glowing with a blue at once misty and intense, and a

great cloud mass, as if carved from a soft creamy marble, was lifting up and up into unimaginable free heights, where the great clean wind ran westward from the sea.

She gave him a cup of coffee, and he took it absently, noticing that she had changed her heavy black for a shapely dress of some gray cotton stuff that made her look thinner and smaller. She sat in a rocking-chair at his shoulder and creaked it softly now and then.

"But you must have had a terrible time clearing all this, Mrs. McDevitt. And living here all by yourself. How did you ever do it?"

She creaked reflectively. "I had a six-shooter," she said, and then stopped again. "And it's wonderful how you toughen up to using a grubbing hoe. I grubbed all that out myself, after the men cut the trees. I made them leave all those pine trees, though. I didn't mind being alone here. It got so I didn't like to be anywhere else. Once when the rains were bad I waded in from Gouls with water up to my waist and a sack of Irish potatoes on my shoulder. Mr. Barnes didn't want me to go."

"I was up in Miami, waiting on table to make enough money to put grapefruit in. A man come in and said all this part of the country was swept away with a cloudburst, and I couldn't rest until I'd come to see. My house hadn't been finished long. But when I got here, sopping wet to my armpits, the house was all high and dry. This land is higher's anything around here. So I stayed here for a week until the water went down, and worked around and lived on Irish potatoes. I was glad to get back here from town. It was getting too crowded here. I finished clearing my half acre in an old night, that was Sunday then showed me how to put in sweet potatoes."

"She smiled. "That's a kind of funny," I was laughing over that now, anything by that time that snakes and McDevitt. Staying out here by myself nights somehow I got to hating him more and worse, and every once in a while I'd get somebody coming up that road I'd think what I'd do if it was him. Well, this morning—just about when my house was finished and the well was dug, it was early in the morning. I always got up at the peak of day, and it wasn't hardly light when I thought I heard McDevitt stumbling around the well. I don't know what got into me. I was all a-tremble, and I went to the door and fired all six shots up at the peak of day, and it was dark when I went to bed."

"All he did was kind of crouch down, and when I went over to look, it was this old nigra, and he was so scared he was as white as a sheet. He said, 'Miss Sarah,' he says to me. 'No man's goin' to ever steal up on you in the nighttime,' and he would of run when he got his breath, but I started laughing and I told him he needn't be scared. All he was scared of was me."

"All he was scared of was me," he says to me. "Uncle Joseph, they used to call him, and when he showed me about the sweet potatoes I put a lot in just over there where the soil's good, and I sold them to Mr. Barnes in Miami. Then I put in tomatoes for a while, and did right well with them, so I didn't have to work in town the six months they allow you to your land. I did all the work myself, so it didn't cost much."

Larry had leaned back against the post so that he could look up at her and at the soft sky too. The morning and what had happened to Joe McDevitt seemed very far off to him. He thought perhaps they began to seem to be, too, for suddenly her face wrinkled into a network of silent laughter. Her narrowed eyes were brightly vigorous and all the lines of her face were pleasantly relaxed. Her hands were relaxed on her knees.

"Talk about funny, though. I have to laugh every time I think of it. It shows what a fool I was in those days. When I'd made enough money in Miami to get my house built down here I was crazy to get

into it. I wanted my own roof and my own pine trees. Well, it was all done but the front door, and that had to come down from Miami special on a wagon. I'd been sleeping over to the Marsha's, those good niggers that told you about ten miles up the road, and I'd got my furniture, a stove and a bedstead and one-two things McDevitt's mother sent down to me, and I made up my mind I wasn't going to wait any longer for that front door."

"I was just going to sleep and live in my house, anyway. So when night come on my six-shooter, with the belt over my nightgown, and I showed the headboard of the bed right up against the open door. It's one of those high wooden headboards. I went to sleep and slept like a log, not thinking of anything. Well, long about three-four o'clock in the morning I woke up with a jump and lay there listening to how still it was and thinking how far I was from anything and how dark it was, and me all alone in the middle of it. Well, it come over me all of a sudden that anybody could crawl right through that door in an space under the bed. I was nervous of that before. And while I was laying there thinking that, something screamed way out in the woods."

"Well, say—scared? I was scared I was cold and stiff, and I could see things moving in the dark all around me and things crawling and creeping out of the dark under that bed. I didn't dare to move or break the bed springs, and there was my six-shooter that had worked around under my head and was boring a hole right through me. When that thing screamed I thought I'd just die right there. You could hear wild cats sometimes in those days, only then I didn't know what it was. And the next morning I went over to Marsha's and stayed there until that door got there, and I had three bolts put on, and you bet I was scared. I was scared enough over that now any time I think of it."

"And two days later was the time I shot all six snakes in the air. I was scared I was another funny thing. I can't bear snakes. I was sitting in this chair inside my door, with the door open—that was before this porch was built. I was sewing something when I saw a snake in my lap. And all of a sudden I just kind of saw something on the floor out of the tail of my eye, and before I ever turned to see what it was, a kind of cold feeling went all over me and, think I, 'That's a snake.' Before I knew exactly what I was doing I grabbed my gun and I shot all six shots at that thing I saw, and it was a rattlesnake as thick as your wrist, and not two feet from my foot."

"The first time I got a good look. It was dead as a piece of string, and I saw bullet holes through it and around it right into my new floor. You can go in and see where they are right now. And that afternoon there was a man here and he was looking at some of the trees. For I thought I'd see how they'd do here. He says, 'Look, there's a snake,' and I turned around, and sure enough there was another one. I guess maybe two snakes in one day was too much for me for everything went all kind of black and I didn't know what I was doing until I see the man looking and laughing at me. I was killing that snake with a snake. I was blind mad. I always did hate a snake, but that was about all I ever saw on my place. Though that time I told you about when it rained so hard and I waded in from Gouls there were moccasins on some of the stumps. I was just as happy any now, except out in the deep Glades."

The chair creaked. The high great pillar of cloud was turning a soft pink. A mockingbird, tail and wings all a-cack, landed

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that time. It felt as if something inside of me was a hard lump that wouldn't let me feel anything. I wasn't going to have McDevitt say I'd kept them from seeing him. It was just as it used to be when he'd try to find out if I had a weak place he could get hold of, and I gritted my teeth to keep from showing it to the boys.

"They didn't come back for two days, and I didn't expect them to. I had a couple of nigras working for me then and I made them cut down all the orange trees I had and burn them. I couldn't stand the look of them. I had them drag the trees down to a cleared space at the edge of my land and the fire showed red through the pine trees. That night the boys came back as if nothing had happened, walking up the path, with the glare through the pines showing faint and McDevitt walking between them.

"I wouldn't let him set foot on the porch. 'I told you once and I tell you again, Peter McDevitt,' I says, 'that I won't have you on my place. The boys can do what they like. They're old enough to know better. But you, I don't want to see again. I won't have, and you can make up your mind to it.'

"George came up to me and put his arm around me and his black head, like my father's, was way in my mind. 'Ah, man,' he said to me, 'Grammer, McDevitt used to say you were too hard. Dad never done as much harm to you as you thought. Joe and I think you'd ought to let him come and talk things over with you. He's had a hard time, too, and you would be nice to let bygones be bygones.'

"I didn't feel his arm around me no more than if it was a piece of iron, and I looked down at Joe standing there beside McDevitt, and he was as tall as I was. For the first time I see that his hair that had been gold color when he was a baby had turned to be copper-colored like his father's, and his eyes were like his. 'You're no more narrow than me,' the two of them stood and looked at me, and George dropped his arm and looked at me, and McDevitt's eyes began to shine and his nose came down over his mustache and his teeth under it were white and shining, like gold dentures, and he smiled as if at last he'd found the place where I was weak, and I knew it.

"That was when it seemed as if I didn't know what I was doing, except that I heard somebody telling them they could all three go away and never let me see them again as long as they'd rather have him than me. Then I saw them walking back down the road, all of them, as if they were hurrying, and I ran in and got my six-shooter and ran down the path after them, and I was shooting over their heads. When I'd shot all six shots I threw my gun away and went on stumbling in the dark after them, down through the pine woods where there was a reddish light from the bonfire still flickering.

"At the gate I saw McDevitt go on down to a car he had there, and Joe turned around and started to come back toward me, and George stopped and watched him, and then he began to walk toward me too. I stopped and watched them come, with their backs to McDevitt, and it seemed as if the hard thing in me was melting and softening and warming me all over. I came to myself all of a sudden and I could see Joe's face and George's, just as clear, without any kind of dark mist over them, and it seemed to me that it didn't really matter how weak anybody thought I was as long as I had my boys. I started to walk to them, too, almost crying, and I was just going to beg them to come back anyway, that I'd do anything they wanted me to.

"That was when Henry Marsh drove up and turned in my gate, passed the boys and leaned out and shouted at me that the pine woods in back of the place where the orange-tree fire was had caught and it was threatening the rest of my place and on his side clear up to his grapefruit grove. I didn't understand him at first, until he kept saying that the fire was creeping toward

the pines. And I looked, and sure enough all that light wasn't just the bonfire but the palmetto flaring up and popping and flying and the flames climbing like ragged ribbons all the way up one dead tree that stood nearest. If I hadn't been so taken up with McDevitt I would have known the difference long ago.

"Well, there wasn't anything else to do but go and fight the fire. I guess George and Joe must have turned around and gone back with McDevitt, because I didn't see them any more that night. I rushed up to the house for some burlap bags, and then Henry Marsh and I drove as near the fire as we could get. I could see Marsh's men black against the flames thrashing at it. A fire in the pines down here isn't the same as a forest fire anywhere else. The fire clings to the woody soil and the oily palmetto and once in a while it gets up into a tree. If there's a dead branch or a rotten place, the whole tree burns up then. The bark is made tough and heavy like scales, so that the fire can't hurt it if the tree is sound, and even young pines, if there isn't anything the matter with them, will burn only a little and not be killed. But where there's an old tree with its insides dead and rotted the fire leaps at it and the whole tree bursts into flame like it was tinder and the light of it brightens everything all around. Before you know it the tree crashes down and throws burning branches and ends of fire clear across a road or a fire path, and a new patch of palmetto will crackle up and blaze as if it was covered with kerosene.

"Through the smoke we could see the ground covered with blazing stumps and little edges of fire and an outer ring of flames where the fire was running toward my pine. Then a big tree that was burning fell like a fiery flag, falling straight toward the finest stand of them between there and the house, and I just went crazy. What I'd been with snakes or with McDevitt wasn't anything to that. I was so scared the pines would go. Henry Marsh said I snatched a wet burlap out of his hand and went at that burning tree single-handed, stamping and beating, with my skirts and my shoes in the flying embers, until he said it was a miracle I didn't catch fire myself. But all I remember was the heat on my face and a kind of wildness in me to get that fire out, no matter what happened or what it cost.

"And then suddenly that tree was out and there wasn't any more creeping ring of flame, but only black stumps and branches and the ground hot and smoking underfoot. The men had stopped the fire up on the other side next to Henry Marsh's grove and there was only some palmettos still burning in the middle and the smoldering earth where the fire had crept down into the peat and would smolder that way for days until it burned itself out. They got me back to my house and fixed up my burned hands and legs and feet, and I slept that night as if I was dead.

"The next day I sent word up to George and Joe that they could come back and see me when they wanted to, but I never said anything about McDevitt. And although they come back sometimes, it wasn't any use. I guess I knew it all along. Something had changed in them. McDevitt hung

around Miami and I knew the boys saw him and were with him, although he never tried to come out here again himself. That night I finished something for me. I knew I'd never dare to say his name to them again or ask them what they were doing. I never did. They got jobs in town, I guess, and when they come to see me I was glad to see them, but I never treated them like I'd used to, and they weren't the same with me.

"They brought me money sometimes, and I wouldn't take it and I wouldn't ask them why they got it, although they seemed to have plenty and dressed real nice. But I guessed things. They got to act more and more like McDevitt, smile like he did and not move their heads when they'd look at things, but only their eyes, and talk smooth and shifty. But sometimes they'd come back, or one of them alone, all tired out, and stay for a while, and all that would slip off them and they'd be just like my boys again, laughing and joking. I'd go in nights when they were asleep and look at them, great long heavy boys, the black one and the red one, sprawled over the bed."

The quick tropic twilight was driving the yellow light and the sun out of the clearing between the pine trees. The sky overhead was lifting and receding into a high thin dome of green quivering light into which the prickle of a star came suddenly.

Larry Gibbs did not dare turn his head to look at her, stone-still in her chair. Her chair itself did not creak any more. But when she spoke again, except for the stiffness of her lips, her voice was deliberate and clear and dry.

"So I never let them or McDevitt see that I had a weak place, never once. I never said anything to them or pleaded with them. I never let them see me cry. I didn't cry. McDevitt went away finally, I guess. I guess maybe he got driven out of town. And the thing that happened then—happened."

There was a long silence. Her voice said at last in a breathless murmur, "And then I can't tell McDevitt—I haven't—cried—yet." There was a man coming up the roadway to the house. Henry Marsh stopped and watched him come. He was glad he would not have to say anything now. The man was thin and smile-looking, and as he came up to the steps Larry saw he was fumbled with his hat and had red rims to his blue eyes.

"Evenin', Mis' McDevitt," he said uncomfortably. "Mis' Marsh wanted I should step over and see if you needed anything, or if you wouldn't like to sleep to our house tonight."

Larry stood up slowly and turned to look at her. She was rocking again, but her profile was white parchment stretched tight over the boldness of her mouth and chin and her eyes were like smudges deep within their sockets.

"You're a right good neighbor, Henry Marsh," she said. "Tell Lizzie I don't want anything, thank you, and I wouldn't be comfortable anywhere else, not here. I want to be up early in the morning. There's a man coming with some avocado seedlings. I thought I'd see how they'd do here. This young man is going back home. Maybe he'd give you a ride back as far as your house. I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure."

Her chair creaked slowly as the two men went toward Larry's car. Driving back along the dark road Larry spoke only occasionally to the thin man, who seemed much affected. He told himself it was ridiculous to be affected so much himself, and yet he could not forget her sitting there on that bench. He found he had dreaded, in leaving her, to see some evidence of the defeat and dissolution of what in her he had found splendid, that spirit which by repeated and hard-won victories had strengthened itself, had learned to do without all the ordinary happinesses. He saw now that he had had nothing to dread. She had maintained herself, like an old pine through many burnings, by the enduring soundness of its own wood. That, Larry saw, was his story; if he could put into English his feeling of so important and so abiding a thing.



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