

WOMEN AND BIRDS

by

Marjory Stoneman Douglas

It was a lonely sort of place for a woman and a child to be alone in.

The brown board Lodge with the wide screen porch wide on two sides was set beside the road that cut through the dark jungle. The jungle itself, towered over by the rustling green stars of huge royal palms that grew native here and gave the park its name, was not large, only a kind of island far away from the last town, surrounded by enormous empty stretches of saw grass and thin pineland, of this flat end of Florida.

The roadway and a rough grassy lawn with benches and shrubs made the only openness where the sun fell brightly. The upstairs windows and the long porch to the north were shaded by high ancient live oaks, their great branches shaggy with moss and air-plants making a shadowy cavern. Behind that, and west and south of the building, the true jungle pressed, its struggling vines and shoots and twigs and branches matted and masked with a green that even in the brightest day above loomed almost black.

There were few cars on the road now. The child could stand and press her nose against the porch screening to watch for the truck-load of men that went by twice a week, from their work empty miles farther south at Cape Sable. Earlier in the year automobiles full of fishermen or hunters bound south or north along that road had stopped for the fried chicken and lime pie her grandmother

set for them on one of the verandah tables, or to sleep the night in the big clean rooms upstairs, filling the lobby or the porch in the evening with their loud hearty talk or clumping downstairs before dawn for the breakfast she would have ready for them. Or men of a different caliber, scientists interested in jungle plants or butterflies or tree-snails would stay to prowl the jungle trails cut through the dim heart of the ancient growth. But for the two of them now, the place had been empty for weeks.

There were rustlings and stirrings and callings out there in that jungle in the blackness of the nights, the rasping and buzzing and clicking of insects louder or softer with the rising or setting of the moon. Owls hooted there, big rough voices that in the distance sounded like the staccato baying of hounds, or the tender throbbing of little owls on branches near lighted windows. The fireflies made soft pale oozy patterns in the dark. The child woke at night to laugh at the friendly, loud-echoing talk of the chuck-wills-widow whose ringing conversations from a tree here and then there and then miles and miles away in the leafy darkness, never seemed to stop all night long. Even that harsh scream far or near out there no longer frightened her because her grandmother said sleepily and calmly, "Never mind that ole panther."

Her grandmother was always there. Daytimes, her light step made busy patterns in the big kitchen and the porches and the upstairs rooms she kept so clean. Her good voice spoke words that were a constant comfort, encouragement, entertainment, all the child's day long. She was as safe there in the house by the deep living jungle as she was in the big bed, with her grandmother's stout

pleasant body between her and the dark.

In the daytime the jungle was nothing to be afraid of, either. They walked regularly the trails that curved in the green dimness about some monster ancient live-oak killed by a great strangling fig that towered its leafy crown far above in the sunlight. They watched the specks of sun wavering like the bright striped butterflies on the pale lower leaves and spiders in their pearly beautiful webs and the lichens and tree snails and lizards on great boughs seemingly arrested in their long, silent struggle upward for the sun.

To the south and west of the house, beyond the kitchen porch and the door where the underbrush had been thinned about the pump-house for the water tank, they went together every morning to put a pail of table scraps under a tree. The raccoons came often and ate even as the woman and the little girl stood quietly at a distance and watched them, the mother raccoon with her black mask and bright eyes and sharp nose sniffing them out and the furry young ones bundling after. It was a constant thrill to the child to see their cunning black hands at work dipping the toast crusts in the pan of water set for them and to see how near she could creep and be still again before they noticed her.

Beyond there still the man who came out occasionally from Florida City to make repairs, put a chicken wire around what seemed like an endless stretch of shadowy tree country, for the deer that had been caught as fawns when the mother was killed and brought up there, safe from the panther. They had plenty of green things to feed on and a tub of water the grandmother filled for them every day. They stretched timidly their wet black noses to the child's hand holding carrots or bits of bread through the wire, the blank

gentleness of the long fringed eyes never quite looking at her.

The grandmother saw to it that there was so much in the child's life to see and hear and talk about that she could never know what it was to be lonely. The woman herself was never for a moment lonely or afraid. She was sure she had the child safe here at last, and could keep her so. At the same time there was no moment of the day when she ceased to be vigilant. In the long nights of heaviest sleep she might wake to some new sound outside, lying relaxed and thinking the sound out to its cause or getting up and moving soundlessly on her strong bare feet in the dark, to assure herself that all the windows and doors downstairs were fastened securely and that nothing stood out there in that pale empty roadway or happened in the busy teeming night life of the jungle that could be a danger to her child. She would make her rounds and come back to her place in the bed by the heavy, sweetly sleeping child and lie quietly with a light cover over them both in the balmy, night-fragrant air from the open window, deeply content with this security which she felt herself now so ready at any moment to enforce.

The Committee in Miami who were in charge here must have felt that readiness and resourcefulness in her, when they gave the job as caretaker and housekeeper of the Lodge in the park to this Mrs. Bodley, who had her pretty, plump brownhaired grand daughter to look after and seemed glad for the very small sum they could pay in addition to her living. They had seen that although she was a grandmother and heavier than she must have been as a girl, she moved lightly and alertly and sat waiting their questions with her strong hands quiet in her lap, she square face with the good humored mouth and dark direct eyes composed and ready. There was not much grey in the

brown hair pinned back straight and they believed at once, as she told them, that she could wash and cook and clean and keep on her feet all day without a hint of tiredness. And she could drive the light truck and fire a gun and nail things and paint and putty and take care of chickens and kill them and clean them--and a lot more things than she told the ladies of the Committee, she thought to herself afterwards, smiling quietly in the dark.

Nobody who stayed in the bed rooms or ate the meals she cooked and served, ever said anything but that what she did there, and around the place, too, cutting the shrubs, weeding, watering the grass and raking, was well done.

"It isn't anything to do" she always said, smiling her quiet assured smile, keeping her warm affectionate hand on the child's cheek pressed to her skirts, so that Molly would not be either too shy or too forward with strangers. If they could have seen what she'd done since she was a girl they'd not be surprised, she often thought. It would be hard to tell them about her father's shack on some lonely island of the West Coast, overflowing with bare-legged boys and girls; nothing to eat but what they shot or fished for or raised from the garden he scratched from the black dirt by the Indian mound, the shack patched and lived in for nothing with rainwater sweet from the cleaned out cistern and hens crooning under the guava bushes and all about, the blue Gulf water and the dark far line of mangrove. Panthers cried in the nights over there and rattlesnakes coiled in the scrub and a barefoot girl had to be as ready and quick as any boy, used to knives and shot guns and cast-nets and oars, and watchful in all things.

Once in a while they lived in a settlement where there was a school and she had applied herself earnestly and quickly to learn-

ing what she could. Back on some island again she had had to stay and help her mother with the younger children while the boys went fishing with the father for whatever money the nearest fish house would pay. They had good times, too, she remembered, with stories their mother told and songs and singing games that she taught this child of hers now, sorry that she had no other children to play with. But that had all changed when her father had been drowned in a storm and her mother died with a long sickness and the boys grew up and went away.

She remembered now only once in a while the handsome face of the young fisherman she married, who'd come home crippled from that other war. She'd worked in the clam house at Marco to bring up her two girls, doing what she could, waiting on table at the hotel, sewing dresses for fishermen's wives. The husband had died. Her daughter Emily married and lived in the north and did not seem very happy.

She thought often of both her daughters, delicate little girls, one with a blue ribbon and one with pink. She had wanted all the pretty things for them and none of the hard work. Perhaps she had made a mistake, not knowing how she could put into them some of her own independence and endurance. It had seemed to her that women in those coastal villages had not enough to look forward to, watching the fishing boats go and come, marrying young and having children quickly as their mothers did, wearing clean cotton dresses to the one store in the afternoon and walking about with empty eyes. It was something more that they needed, she had felt, but she could not say what it was. There had never been any emptiness in her.

So Addie, the pretty blonde one, married this child's father, himself dark and dashing, a fish guide and mate on one of those

big charter boats from Miami, ugly when he got drunk and cursed with the attentions of many women. Two or three years her daughter had lived where he left her, in the Keys, or Key West, waiting until he should come back to her again, loving or hating her according to his mood.

Mrs. Bodley had gone over to the East Coast to take care of her when this baby was on the way. She'd found work in a grocery store in one of those small towns on the railroad south of Miami and kept a small clean house for Addie and the child. But Addie hated her for hating him and went chasing after him sometimes, as if she had no pride, no spine, at all. Then she came back, sick, and died in her mother's bed. All those deaths, Mrs. Bodley thought sometimes, and only herself going on still, and this dark, ruddy handsome little girl who seemed to be more hers than any of them had ever been, for whom she felt more than she ever had felt, deeply and passionately responsible.

It turned her faintish still, who never had fainted once in her life, to think of the time the father had turned up at her front door, half-drunk and dangerous, with a florid woman peering from his car, to claim his child. Whether he had any right to her or not, she had told him fiercely, he should never have her. She had never felt safe there for a minute having to leave the child with a neighbor and never knowing, when she got home from work, if Molly would still be there.

That was why she was so grateful for the remoteness, the safety of this place. She put away resolutely now the worry she would have to face next year, when the strong-bodied, active minded child should begin school. It seemed to the grandmother with every day of this happy safety she could less and less face the idea of living in town again where at any minute he could drive by and see the

child playing or walking to school with the other children. She told herself fiercely that she would keep her right here, hidden, teach her herself. But she knew that would not be right or fair. She meant not to think of that for another year, anyhow.

That was why she could answer with complete cheerfulness the question so often asked her, "Isn't it lonely here for you? Aren't you ever afraid?" Everything about the life here, within sound of the child's laughter, was a rare pleasure to her. It was pleasant to drive the light truck into Florida City once a week for groceries, with Molly bright-eyed beside her, and people she knew stopping to talk on the streets. It was better still to ride back out the long dusty road through the sun-spattered ranks of the pine trees and see them fall away at last to the open slough of brown sawgrass and some white birds rising and veering out of it, to see beyond the great royal palms rising high over the solid jungle, to rattle up to the lodge in the early sunset and know how securely they were at home.

Yet she had lived too long on calm waters which in a moment some roving storm could shatter, to be free from her sober vigilance here over everything for which she was responsible. She worried now because there had been no spring rains. She watched the slow dwindling of the watercourse under the bridge at the edge of the slough. The grass along the roadway was burned strawcolor by the unrelieved power of the sun. She had the pump and the big water tank which supplied the house and the hoses from the deep pipe well but deep along the jungle trails that never knew the sun the centuries-old leaf-rot underfoot was dry as sawdust. The tracks of all sorts of animals marked the dirt about the deer's water tub. In the nights the panther



cried nearer and nearer. And although her own calm was not affected she saw to it, without frightening her, that Molly never played outside the house alone. She could not remember how many weeks there had been since it had rained.

Yet still she looked forward with pleasure to the long summer. It did not matter to her that the war took more and more of the young men who drove by here and stopped for her good dinners, or restricted the supply of gasoline for other visitors. She had plenty to do without them. She had written the Committee she would re-paint the upstairs bathroom and the pantry and make new curtains. She meant to make dresses for Molly and her married daughter in the north. She meant to teach her to read and spell and add, now that she was a big and growing six years old. There was the cooking and the cleaning and the washing and the trips to town. They would have a good time together as they always did, the child's laughter bubbling and fresh, with her dolls and her tricycle on the big verandah, her brown eyes quick to observe and remember and enjoy.

She was startled, then, by a letter from the Committee announcing that the distinguished elderly scientist who had lunched there earlier in the spring meant to return to stay there for several weeks. He had been charmed by the quiet of the green jungle and her cooking. Now he was alone and not well, and not yet ready to go north. At first gasp it seemed to her she could never in the world make him comfortable here who was the most famous man she had ever laid eyes on, the greatest living authority on American birds, as they told her, the friend of presidents and millionaires and very important people.

But when she saw him walking slowly from the car up

to her door, small and white-haired, his blue eyes that had been so keen and authoritative dimmed and faintly desolate with the loneliness of his age, she forgot everything else except that he needed what comfort she could give him. He settled into the big airy corner room upstairs with his bag and his books and his folding chair, and a long relaxed sigh. "It's exactly what I've wanted, Mrs. Bodley," he said, and his eyes, his whole face, lighted with the smile that was still charming and somehow youthful. It included the quiet child at her skirts. "Molly and I'll try to please you, Doctor," she murmured.

It was an increasing pleasure to have him there. He looked better even after his first quiet night. His slow routine, his late breakfast on the great porch, his dinner at noon, his nap, his walk up and down the road in the late afternoon light, his simple supper and early bed, was something about which the child and the woman were happy to centre their lives. He wrote piles of letters every day and mailed them when they drove in town and received piles more to be answered. She shopped for the things he liked to eat and came back to see him and the child sitting contentedly on the truck seat together, looking out at the bustle of the small town with the same interested eyes.

He seemed to have still, inspite of his lifetime of knowledge of birds, his greatest pleasure in simply sitting and watching birds.

It had not occurred to her before that birds were anything a person could take pleasure in. They had always been there in her life, of course, pouring overhead in some enormous flight of wings at sunset or white out of a white mist crying in some early dawn.

But they were only important if they could be shot and eaten. A big fat curlew that some people called "white ibis" was better than a turkey at Thanksgiving for hungry children. So that she was completely surprised at Molly's round-eyed delight in sitting and watching the birds as long as Doctor did, absorbed in his talk about them. In a way, she supposed, for the child it was almost like school.

The old man and the child spent a happy morning under the great cavernous oak cleaning out a cement bird bath that stood there and setting low boards as feeding trays on rocks near the ground. Presently Molly called her to come and look. All three watched a flight of dark birds swooping from the high branches, covering the boards and all the ground around them where the seeds had been scattered, with a moving, shining carpet of black glistening backs or blue-black ones, iridescent as if they had been oiled. Among them fluttered smaller dark wings topped with epaulets of orange and red. Birds in tens, twenties, fifties, flew and alighted there, hopping and huddling and picking at the seed on the boards until the tapping of their beaks sounded like light rain. "Grackles and red-winged blackbirds," the child whispered to her. She had already learned to tell the straddling grackle stride from the others. More came dropping from the sky or the high branches, the sun flowing and glinting on all that moving, feathery life, those almost weightless crowding bodies, so near and so lovely, that had known the treetops and the wind and the upper sky.

The old man's face was absorbed as if to sit and watch them so had always been for him a release from the heaviness of earth, an unfailing gift of lightness and of freedom.

The child made a quick irresistible gesture of excite-

ment and suddenly with one loud thrum all those black wings rose and were gone whirling into the air beyond the topmost leaves. She would have cried, but he said contentedly, "They will be back. Listen to the sound they make. It's like a great turning rusty wheel."

They made a turning wheel of wings, too, dropping again from the branches to the bath and the feeding boards, the whole mass again flying and lighting and feeding and splashing and flying up again, with harsh grackle voices and black-birds "ker-longa-lee-ing" and skreaking and trilling and squawking. The wheel would run down. The separate crying, little by little would ease into silence.

Then with some single squawk, little by little all that tumult of bird-voices broke out again and the rusty wheel of sound turned and turned once more.

Mrs. Bodley left them there together and went back smiling to her baking and sweeping. Now she often wondered about a thing she had heard him say, that first time he had lunched here with the other scientists. She had gone lightly and quickly at her serving about that table but once she had heard him say that the love of birds was born in a man. That was why he was always so much interested when he heard about some young boy eager to do nothing but learn about birds. That was the way all the great ornitho--ornitho--anyway, all the great authorities on birds always began. There were not enough of them, he'd said. When they were still boys they should be discovered and encouraged. They might never make a great deal of money but it was a fine life.

That was what she turned over in her mind now, looking down and touching lightly the smooth dark head of her little girl, her good child, with that new alertness in her happy face. She left him with her now without fear that her chatter would tire him because her compan-

ionship seemed to give him real pleasure.

Every day the child learned more about all that wealth of bird life around them. After their afternoon naps, the two sat outside on one of the front benches or walked slowly, watching and listening for songs and wings. The child's eyes were so much sharper than his, even with his binoculars, that all she had to do was to describe to him accurately some characteristic flight, some detail of outer tail feather or band about the neck, for him to name it instantly. It became a game which seemed to amuse them both.

It was the child's sharp glance that caught the big dark owl shape in the tree, huddled away from the light, turning his head clear around to follow them with his flat huge eyes as they tip-toed below. At twilight they watched him sweeping with soundless wing about the house. Now at night when he hooted the child waked and chuckled, mocking him sleepily with his own words Doctor had taught her, "Who cooks for you, big barred owl?"

She learned to know the brown Florida wren that worked its way around the porch every day, with its burst of cheerful carolling, and the lovely flitting little warblers, like butterflies, that Doctor told her had flown hundreds of miles over the far Caribbean and would fly hundreds of miles still, on their long windy northern path. The child could pick them out in the plates of his bird book and suddenly seemed to know her letters and recognize the spellings of their names.

The Doctor liked best to stroll with her in the roadway about sunset time and watch for the fine flitting shape that often came tumbling and stooping and rising swift as a leaf in the wind over

the highest tree tops, the white flashing body, the white wings, like an apparition from the cloud dazzle, the fork-tailed kite. They could walk slowly along to a drying swampy place and catch the last of a great flock of white ibis fishing or little green heron or kingfishers darting like clucking jewels. The child learned them all.

Again it was her sharp eye, looking far down the road, that made out shapes "like little old men" walking and standing on the bridge over the water course. Mrs. Bodley got the truck out and drove them far enough so that they could walk softly nearer, where the jungle opened out to the vastness of the sawgrass and the watercourse lay drying in its own mud.

The walking black and white figures with the big curved beaks let them come only just so far until with a great flapping of wings and lifting and trailing of long legs above the bridge rail, they went away slowly cloudward the big wood ibis, and began their slow drifting and circling, high, high up, where it lifted the heart to follow.

In the drying pools the last of the garfish lay like logs and there was water for only a few small creatures. Molly squeezed both their hands with excitement, in the silence they kept, to see a lanky brown bird come stalking down a little path to the water to put its feet warily in the mud and poke with its bill until it found a snail shell and cracked it against a stone at its very feet. "It's very unusual to see a limpkin feeding so near," he murmured to them with pleasure as keen as the child's.

But for herself, the grandmother had had a great start. Far-off beyond the sun-gilded distance of the saw grass, at the

horison, she saw a small lifting darkening smudge, the thing she watched for. Fire.

At least, she reasoned with herself, it was far away and the wind here blew steadily against it. The flames would go west. But it made her silent. Perhaps she should urge Doctor to go away now, before anything happened. Yet she could not bear to lose what his companionship meant to Molly. Every day now it seemed as if not just her round young body, but her mind, was growing stronger and more active.

"I don't mind telling you that that is an exceptional child you have, Mrs. Bodley," Doctor said that evening. It was enough to keep her silent, for a few more days anyway, about the thing for which now all her vigilance was aroused.

She stood out in the roadway early the next morning, sniffing the untainted pearly air of dawn, to stop the truck going north from Cape Sable.

"No mam," the brown lean man said, "They's no far south but nights you can see glares to west'ard. Yes, mam. It's sure dry. The deer and the raccoons come crowdin' down by the docks, tame as anything, beggin' for water."

"You tell the fire warden to come out here and watch this road regular," she said to him, but he only shook his head.

"I'll tell him, mam, but you know how he is. He only got two men and they's kep' busy right around town. Maybe you bet' close up and come in."

"No," she said, vehemently. "No. I won't. I'm here to see to things. I--I got to stay." But as he drove off she saw at last how much she was alone.

But she had two long hoses and the steady pump that filled the big water tank. She could detect no taint of smoke at all on the fresh east wind. Nor could she in the next nights, going softly on her rounds in the dark house, hearing outside the familiar noises of the jungle's midnight.

In the daylight there was no smell on the wind, but sometimes she thought there lay over the sunlight a kind of brassy shadow. Every day she let the child in her bathing suit play as long as she liked under the splashing stream of the hose. The wet soaked the diamond shining grass that grew rank and green and dripped from the freshened bushes where the big pink and red hibiscus blossomed again, and shone from the leaves of the nearest jungle walls. She worked the long splashing sprays high against the wooden walls of the Lodge and the porch roofs, keeping them cool and damp. It was her one worry that she could not reach the shingles of the higher v-shaped roof.

But in the meantime, in all that constant gleaming and dripping of bright drops everywhere, over the bright grass and the blossoming bushes all the birds of that region came to feed and play; grackles, red wings, crows, blue jays, mocking birds, cardinals, the big and little woodpeckers, wrens, even the shy vireos, the phoebes and the kingbirds. Birds by tens and fifties came sliding on slanted wings to splash and ruffle their wet feathers in the spray, all skirling and shrieking and piping and singing in a constant movement and whirl and thrum of wings. The sun and shadow, the trees, the grass, the air were alive. It was a house besieged with wings.

The Doctor and the child watched them for hours. But the grandmother noticed only that sometimes now the wind veered to the



west and came over strong with smoke.

On such a night, after the two were safely abed, she drove the truck hastily south beyond the southern edge of the jungle, looking out to a vast open space of cut-over pineland, all one darkness now under powdery star-whiteness. She sat and counted the pinky glare of three fires far away, beyond the black marks of the farthest pines. Once she saw the small raw brightness of flame itself, cracking the dark. The wind was east again and no smell came, but her skin crawled.

In another day she found a wisp of smoke trailing from the roots of a tree along the roadway beyond the bridge, as if someone had thrown a lighted cigarette butt days before and the fire had crawled and smoldered deep into the dry rot of the trunk itself. Stirred with a stick, the fire burst upward, like an aroused rattlesnake. She carried water buckets there in the truck for half a day, before she was sure that the treacherous smolder was quite dead. That night, she smelled the smoke in her own dark hair and did not sleep.

She strove to keep her anxiety from the alert eyes of the old gentleman. He was too wise not to understand the danger or her constant zeal in watering the house as well as the grass and trees all about. Yet as if each was reluctant to break into the quiet pleasure of these days that more and more seemed to centre about the developing mind of the child, neither said a word.

There was an early dawn in which Mrs. Bodley found herself driving the truck southward, in the first faint windless light. Where the road opened she stared aghast at a great roll of smoke flowing upward between her and the horizon, a yellow-white cumulus cloud growing terribly from the very earth, along which fire ran in a long edge of small wicked teeth, red and dirty orange in the first sun-glare.

Her heart was tight and cold as she drove back.

Within the silent house no sleeper stirred. But when she went out again, through the thickening haze she startled on the grass the delicate forms of four or five strange deer their uneasy heads up, their ears twitching, their wet noses disliking the tainted air. Then with a light clock-clocking of small hooves they ran across the roadway and vanished into the eastward jungle trail. She opened the paddock door and saw her own deer move out timidly and follow them. The reek of distant burning peat lay heavy and sour everywhere.

As the sun grew strong, and she was working the spray of the hose steadily up and down the house walls, the smoke haze thickened. She heard the child thumping down the stairs and left her hose lashed to a bench back and went to smile and do up buttons that could not be reached and set out milk and orange juice and start the bacon in the pan. When she looked up, Doctor was watching her from the doorway. His stoutish small figure was still compact and alert and his smile was ready but his face was grey now with the treacherous weakness of age. He knew. He lifted his eyebrows to the brassy light outside and when she nodded he shrugged a little and sighed, heavily.

"There's a fire a long way off that may go west," she said firmly for both of them. "I've got your breakfast ready, Doctor. You've no need to hurry. Molly, if you're done, put all your doll things in the doll basket and your clean dresses in the suitcase. But they left me to take care here and I mean to. You mustn't get tired, Doctor. If the smoke bothers you, why'n't you lay down on the lobby couch with a wet handkerchief over your face. Molly, here's your chair to stand on to wash the breakfast dishes. Then put on your overalls

and come out and help me. No, Doctor, please. I'd rather you'd take it easy now. Us women will do fine, won't we, Molly?"

The air outside was filled with wavering fine veils. She moved faster now, lashing one hose so that the water drummed on the porch roof and dripped through all the vines below. The hose from the rear faucet drenched her as she dragged it up the water tank ladder. From the top rung the spray reached nearly to the ridgepole. She managed to lash the nozzle so that she could leave it there soaking the shingles and brimming the gutters.

She let Molly in her faded red bathing suit run out dancing and playing with the hose on the front grass, flinging the water high in breaking loops and spirals and curtains of gleaming drops. The birds from the trees flew about her as if she were only a fountain figure, dashing and dipping and ruffling in the wet at her feet, making a wheeling, lifting garland of wings and bright sweeping bodies in the water she whirled. Doctor stood smiling out his window at her as Mrs. Bodley dashed up to her room again to change. All that water from the roof sounded wonderfully like a soaking drumming of rain.

All this could not be good for him. Her eyes avoided the grey look of strain on his face. "We've got lots of water," she called to him.

"I ought to be able to help," he said slowly. But she was only afraid he would try to do something. On an impulse she dashed into her kitchen and fried the chicken she had got ready yesterday and made hot biscuit and set a clean pretty table on the porch. They ate together, she and Molly heartily, and she saw with relief the color come back to his face.

But as they sat for a moment before she gathered up

the dishes, trying not to watch the grey drift through the green oak cavern, suddenly there was a harsh crying in the tree tops far away. The living carpet of birds feeding on the ground, the birds hanging like light fruit among the high branches, were suddenly still. They stood and cocked their shining heads and waited. The cries came again. High overhead birds moved east in a great rushing flight. Here in the shadow the birds leaped in a flapping confusion of wings and cries. They were in the air in masses of wildly beating wings, beating and circling. They lifted and were gone. In that bird-haunted place there was only the stealth of the smoke.

The child began to cry. But the old man said cheerfully, "Let us go up to our naps as usual. That's what your grandmother wants, I'm sure."

She watched them go, gratefully.

Through the still house the sound of the pump throbbed like a faithful heart. She only rinsed her dinner dishes, always peering out the windows. The sun was still clear. The two upstairs were quiet. Then she walked fast out of the house and up the road to the firebreak that last year they had had cut through the jungle westward. Perhaps from the end of that she could see where the fire really was.

The cut stems of coarse grass were harsh about her ankles as she trotted fast between the matted jungle walls. The heat of the sun in the airless space beat on her head and face. She was more tired than she realized, feeling her heart labor, pushing her feet along faster. It was a long way. Every joint in her panting body throbbed. She could be getting old, she thought, for the first time in her life.

The perspiration poured over her hot flesh as if it were hose water. She had to stop and gulp and rub the salt wet out of her blinded eyes.

Only when she glanced back to see how far she had come she was appalled to see how smoke had crept across the open lane behind her, like a solid fog. It poured soundlessly from every crevice of leaf and branch, like a strong windless, choking tide. And overhead, the sun was blotted out by the strong reeking yellow-grey in which now black bits of stuff began to whirl. It was nearer than she thought. Yet she could hear little.

Back there, as she stood, catching her breath, she saw a flight of grasshoppers and smaller insects began to jump and flip and hurtle across the open space, bursting out from the leaves as if driven. Across the same path, between her and the house, she saw a big tawny animal trot like a dog, without turning its white and tawny muzzle toward her, its tawny tail behind like a stiff club, a hurried cat-slink in the line of its back. It was the panther, getting away.

Even as it vanished she was running back wildly across its track through the choking grey drift because only then she let herself realize what had happened. The fire had come up from the western sawgrass at an angle she had not guessed. It was there already, ravening and muffled, in the western jungle. She did not wait to see the solid column of its smoke lifted higher into her narrow view of sky. She was running too hard, her lungs aching, stumbling through the smokey darkness under the ghostlike oaks and around to her kitchen door under the steady drip of that hose from the top of the water tank. In the time she had left it the smoke had thickened there, also. She felt on her panting lips the dry taste of drifting ashes.

It seemed to her now she could hear that dreadful crackling. There was a hot wind on her cheek. The fire was spreading there now in the deep dried humus, the drying leaves, boiling and smoldering and bursting upward in firey petals to the topmost boughs. She shut the useless screen door and hooked it behind her with shaking fingers.

Within, the closed house was dark and silent. She was relieved, while she struggled to control her breath, that for the moment she had not to keep her face cheerful. But her whole mind was on the problem of that unwetted pitch on the highest roof toward the oaks. If she could get the other hose to the porch level-- She remembered a reel of fish line, tied it to a chair back by the open window of the room where the little girl slept. The child opened eyes sleepily in her perspiring pink face as her grandmother put her fingers to her lips. She tossed the line far out over the roof edge. Molly trotted with her downstairs on still feet past the Doctor's closed door. The woman dragged the hose around and tied the line to the nozzle.

Her bare feet were silent on the porch roof as she went out the window to pull the hose up and signalled Molly down there to turn the water on. The stinging smack of it drummed on the wall. By standing in the very edge of the roof, her stout toes clinging to the gutter, and by holding the nozzle as high as she could reach, she found with elation she could wet down all the dry shingles on that higher roof-side. The water blew back around her, soaking and crackling above and running off below. She nodded and shouted cheerfully to Doctor's aroused anxious face within his closed window.

She shouted to Molly to go up and sit with him. They

laughed and waved to her cheerfully to see her getting so wet, screwing up her face against the falling water. The trouble was, she knew her aching arms could not hold up that hose weight indefinitely. She had to lower the nozzle and sweep the stream as far as she could toward the trees around and on the grass below. There were times, it seemed to her, that the smoke was growing so thick she could not breathe. It must be getting bad beyond there, eating and reddening and roaring, the leaves exploding in a thousand saw-edged flames. She heard the roar there now. Faint light flickered and reddened behind the fretted leaves. It gave her strength to hold the hose up to the roof again.

She had to let the hose fall at last, in a fit of coughing. They were coughing in there within the window. The roof was as wet as she could get it. And then another thought sent her hastily back in to her own room and a towel and her last dry dress. There was that extra drum of gas by the pump. If the fire crept up to that--

"You come down stairs and lie down," she said to Doctor. "Molly, keep his handkerchief wet. I'm depending on you. There's one thing still I got to tend to-- you understand, Doctor. I'll get us out. But I got to stay as long as I can-- I got to--"

Again, she could not face the exhaustion in his eyes, or fight the stubborn passion in her own heart, not to go, not to be driven out-- out there where--

She had two buckets she could fill at a lower faucet below the water tank and set herself to fling them over the ground and pump shed. One filled as she trudged with the other and hurled it, a solid silver arc, against the leaves and the wall of branches and again over the pump house and the gasoline drum. She could see now in the sky the spinning, browning column of that smoke, feel the strong suction

of that wind. There was the roar, growing louder, of acres of seething and reaching flame. She had another idea. With a crowbar, she tried to roll the small gas drum along the muddy ground toward the open roadway. She moved it and it rolled back. She moved it again, a foot, another foot. It was more than she could do, she thought suddenly. More than her body, her very mind, could stand. She got it rolling again and slowly, inched it beyond the house, to the open lawn. It seemed that she could have fallen over it and never get up again. Her strength was gone. She stood and shook and clutched her heart and panted. The sound she heard was her own coughing.

When she looked up the child was pulling at her skirt. "Come to Doctor, Gramma", she said, "Come in quick." And as she turned to plod to the front porch door she stood in anguished horror. Beyond the oaks where the jungle was she saw smoke like dirty yellow water boiling along the ground. Upward ribbons of new white writhed and curled in the grey air. Then brightness was there, behind the blackened fretwork of the leaves, brightness reddened and boiled hot and clear. She ran to the hose wasting its water on the ground. The first clear flame in a glaring tongue that ran like a snake's on the open ground, went out in the smack of water and hissing steam. She played the hose frantically as far as she could reach along the border.

The heat crackled the dry oak leaves. And beyond, farther than she could strain to reach with her slender whip of water, fire snaked out of the boiling light and sparkled upward along an ancient tree trunk. A spluttering crackle blew up those beards of old moss, in one long raging victory of fire.

She gave back in agony before that heat with an arm



over her eyes as the cavern of those trees blazed with the light.

The child at her skirts screamed at her, pulling her back. She stumbled to the opened door where the old man clung with horrified eyes. She thought he would fall and die as she looked at him.

"Yes, yes, we'll go now," she gasped. "There'll be nothing left. The trees are burning."

She did not turn her head once to look at the place again, forcing the rattling, loaded truck out through the swirling smoke fog down the darkened road, out to the brightness and the farther air. She was aware now of fright for him. If he died of shock, she would have killed him. Yet presently the old man began to revive and relax. A better color crept into his face. The child between them was already smiling with the speed and the wind that blew and dried her hair.

There was a place far out from the jungle where the road turned an angle, away from the open sawgrass to the edge of the pineland. She stopped the truck there suddenly and rubbed her face on her sleeve as they turned to look back. Far away the island of jungle lay green and small beyond the open, and even the topmost fronds of the great royal palms were lost in that enormous lifting pillar of fire and smoke. It towered almost to the sun and grew as they looked. But far above, as if suddenly against it a high east wind began to fight, the topmost smoke was turned and spread thinly westward, like a bending banner.

"The wind may stop it yet," the old man said slowly.

She could say nothing. If the Lodge were saved, it would rise among the burned out skeletons of those oaks that had for uncounted years stood there in their green-clothed beauty. "It is gone,"

she said, feeling her mouth work and the tears come smartingly from her eyes down to her embittered mouth. She hardly dared to wipe them for fear one or the other would turn their heads and see her desolation. Now she was old and loneliness had her and fear that she had never known drew at her veins. She wiped the tears silently and shuddered back her need to sob, hoping they would not see.

The child stood by the truck door with her head up, gazing out with excitement at the smoke and all that landscape where the sun lay untouched. Her small back was strong and straight and dimpled. Her soft dark hair blew in the wind. "Look Gramma-- Doctor," her voice rose triumphant-- "There are the white ibid. They got away."

Far away to the east for a moment a great flight of white birds rose and fell against the distance, snowy flakes gleaming in the sun and then, in shadow, vanishing. The woman looked at them dully. They were only birds. The old man turned toward them his failing eyes which would never again see that far gleaming flight. Yet he smiled a little, in recognition of beauty he knew with his whole heart. The child shouted as they turned and flashed in the sun again, soaring and white, far-away and untouched and free. She pounded his knee with her happy fists. "There they are-- go on, Gramma-- catch up with them-- hurry--"

"Let's go on, Mrs. Bodley," he said to her and his voice was strong with the clean air he breathed. He did not need to look at the ruin of her face to know her tears and the desolation of her defeat as he had seen the birds, with the understanding of his heart.

"I-- I don't know-- where--," she said trying to con-

trol her voice. "There is no place. Even the truck belongs to the Committee in Miami--"

"Then let us go to Miami," he said stoutly. "Let us tell the Committee everything. Then we shall think what to do next. That is the way the birds are going and Molly will not let us lose sight of them."