

THE PYROPHILES

THE BOUGAINVILLEA

Someday it would crush the house. It sprawled over the cement floor and hung long thorny arms from the great tangle against the verandah posts. From the huge mass heaped on the roof, pieces would suddenly unravel and writhe and twist across the corrugated iron. Curved talons would hook beneath the edges of the iron sheets and prise them loose. The creeper would wedge thorns beneath the guttering, and force it apart. The rich greenness of fleshy leaves would cast a glossy shroud over the decaying house; the purple of bloated flowers would manifest the final agony and passion of the, farmstead. Someday the bougainvillea would destroy the house which supported it.

But not yet.

Not so long as the woman was there to push it back; not to cut or prune but just to push it back so that there was an admission of control and a measure of give and take. The woman thrust a pronged rod back amongst the main tangle, while the child standing beyond the fall of canes, put her hands behind her back and looked at the creeper.

“It is poisonous, you know. The bougainvillea is. Like lantana. It would kill a cow.”

“Poisonous? Nonsense! Look, I will show you,” and the woman plucked a purple flower and placed it on her tongue, chewing softly.

Aghast, the child watched, waiting for the woman to crumple on the gravel path.

“No! You will die!”

But the woman’s eyes crinkled and laughed as she spat out the mush of purple flowers. She was as upright as ever. The child continued to regard the monstrous tangle with apprehension. The woman did not die, but anyone else would and the creeper would kill a cow. It just confirmed something. Something about the ageless woman with whom the child found something to share. Something which they discovered together in the garden-in the bougainvillea, the pedestals of roses, the Chinese jade plants and clumps of perennial statice, in draughts noised in the walls of the bough shed, and in the house in dark corners of the sitting room, the oak-wood chest and peacocks on the jardiniere in the fireplace.

“We must make a cup of tea, now, before you take the eggs home to your mother.” The woman with a handful of maiden-hair fern trailed off along the long verandah and into the kitchen.