

## A Mild Attack of Locusts

(Doris Lessing)

“Look, look, there they are!”

Out ran Margaret to join them, looking at the hills. Out came the servants from the kitchen. They all stood and gazed. Over the rocky levels of the mountain was a streak of rust coloured air, Locusts. There they came.

At once Richard shouted at the cookboy. Old Stephen yelled at the houseboy. The cookboy ran to beat the old ploughshare, hanging from a tree branch, that was used to summon labourers at moments of crisis. The houseboy ran off to the store to collect tin cans, any old bit of metal. The farm was ringing with the clamour of the gong; and they could see the labourers come pouring out of the compound, pointing at the hills and shouting excitedly. Soon they had all come up to the house, and Richard and old Stephen were giving them orders – hurry, hurry, hurry.

And off they ran again, the two white men with them and in a few minutes Margaret could see the smoke of fires rising from all around the farmlands. Piles of wood and grass had been prepared there. There were seven patches of bared soil, yellow colour and pink, where the new mealies were just showing, making a film of bright green; and around each drifted up thick clouds of smoke. They were throwing wet leaves on to the fires now, to make it acid and black. Margaret was watching the hills. Now there was a long, low cloud advancing, rust colour still, swelling forward and out as she looked. The telephone was ringing. Neighbours – quick, quick, there come the locusts. Old Smith had had his crop eaten to the ground. Quick, get your fires started. For of course, while every farmer hoped the locusts would overlook his farm and go on to the next, it was only fair to warn each other; one must play fair. Everywhere, fifty miles over the countryside, the smoke was rising from myriads of fires. Margaret answered the telephone calls, and between calls she stood watching the locusts. The air was darkening. A strange darkness, for the sun was blazing – it was like the darkness of a veldt fire, when the air gets thick with smoke. The sunlight comes down distorted, a thick, hot orange. Oppressive it was, too, with the heaviness of a storm. The locusts were coming fast. Now half the sky was darkened. Behind the reddish veils in front, which were the advance guards of the swarm, the main swarm showed in dense black cloud, reaching almost to the sun itself.

Margaret was wondering what she could do to help. She did not know. Then up came old Stephen from the lands. “We’re finished, Margaret, finished! Those beggars can eat every leaf and blade off the farm in half an hour! And it is only early afternoon – if we can make enough smoke, make enough noise till the sun goes down, they’ll settle somewhere else perhaps....” And then: “Get the kettle going. It’s thirsty work, this.”

Looking out, all the trees were queer and still, clotted with insects, their boughs



weighed to the ground. The earth seemed to be moving, locusts crawling everywhere, she could not see the lands at all, so thick was the swarm. Toward the mountains it was like looking into driving rain – even as she watched, the sun was blotted out with a fresh onrush of them. It was a half-night, a perverted blackness. Then came a sharp crack from the bush – a branch had snapped off. Then another. A tree down the slope leaned over and settled heavily to the ground. Through the hail of insects a man came running.

“All the crops finished. Nothing left,” he said.

But the gongs were still beating, the men still shouting, and Margaret asked: “Why do you go on with it, then?”

“The main swarm isn't settling. They are heavy with eggs. They are looking for a place to settle and lay. If we can stop the main body settling on our farm, that's everything. If they get a chance to lay their eggs, we are going to have everything eaten flat with hoppers later on.” He picked a stray locust off his shirt and split down with his thumbnail – it was clotted inside with eggs. “Imagine that multiplied by millions. You ever seen a hopper swarm on the march? Well, you're lucky.”

“Is it very bad?” asked Margaret fearfully, and the old man said emphatically: “We're finished. This swarm may pass over, but once they've started, they'll be coming down from the North now one after another. And then there are the hoppers – it might go on for two or three years.”

“For the Lord's sake,” said Margaret angrily, still half-crying, “what's here is bad enough, isn't it?” For although the evening air was no longer black and thick, but a clear blue, with a pattern of insects whizzing this way and that across it, everything else – trees, buildings, bushes, earth – was gone under the moving brown masses.

But Margaret preferred not even to think of them. After the midday meal the men went off to the lands. Everything was to be replanted. With a bit of luck another swarm would not come traveling down just this way. But they hoped it would rain very soon, to spring some new grass, because the cattle would die otherwise – there was not a blade of grass left on the farm. As for Margaret, she was trying to get used to the idea of three or four years of locusts. Locusts were going to be like a bad weather, from now on, always imminent. She felt like a survivor after war – if this devastated and mangled countryside was not ruin, well, what then was ruin?

But the men ate their supper with good appetites.

“It could have been worse,” was what they said. “It could be much worse.”

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## Theme

The attack of locusts is a natural calamity that makes the human beings helpless in saving the crops, an asset and a source of living for an agriculturist. The farmers did their best to save their crops from the attack of locusts. They burnt big fires to drift up thick clouds of smoke and made loud noise by beating the tin cans to keep the insects away from their fields.

But all their attempts failed, and the insects ate every blade of their crops leaving the fields to give a look of a devastated landscape. However they did not take the loss to their hearts, and remained calm. They endured what they could not cure.

### Reading Notes

gazed	looked
clamour of gong	sharp sound of a metallic disc
swelling	increasing in size
drifted up	carried along by air or water
acid	sharp, biting (smell, taste)
myriads	very great number
veldt	open grazing land in Africa
snapped off	broken away, making a sharp sound
hoppers	young locusts
mangled	damaged
devastated	destroyed

### EXERCISES

#### 1. Choose the correct answer.

- i. Why did the cookboy run?
  - a) to kill the insects
  - b) to summon the labourers
  - c) to inform the landlady
  - d) to see the locusts
- ii. Why did the houseboy run off to the store?
  - a) to shut the door
  - b) to cover the store
  - c) to collect any bit of metal
  - d) to burn fire
- iii. Why did they throw wet leaves on to the fire?
  - a) to make the smoke acrid and black
  - b) to extinguish the fire
  - c) to burn the leaves
  - d) to burn the insects
- iv. "And they neither went bankrupt nor got very rich" means that they were
  - a) hand to mouth.
  - b) just pulling on their lives.
  - c) enjoying a moderate living.
  - d) penniless.
- v. How did the locusts attack the crops?
  - a) one by one
  - b) in groups
  - c) in swarms
  - d) in formations



- vi. Why did the people beat the tin cans?  
a) to let the insects enjoy music      b) to keep the insects away  
c) to kill the insects                      d) to fill the cans with insects
- vii. What did the farmers do at the time of attack?  
a) They ran away from the place.  
b) They took precautionary measures to keep the locusts away.  
c) They covered their crops.  
d) They shut themselves in their houses.
- viii. Locusts attack in the area of  
a) one mile.                                      b) ten miles.  
c) fifty miles.                                  d) a hundred miles.
- ix. What made the boughs of trees weighed to the ground?  
a) fruit    b) locusts  
c) birds    d) wind storm
- x. How did the land look after the locusts had moved to the south?  
a) all green                                        b) barren  
c) beautiful                                        d) a devastated landscape

**2. Mark the sentences true or false.**

- i. The servants looked happy.  
ii. The old ploughshare was hanging.  
iii. There were eleven patches of bared soil.  
iv. The locusts were coming slowly.  
v. The earth seemed to be motionless.  
vi. The insects are heavy with eggs.  
vii. Margaret preferred to think of the locusts.  
viii. Everything was saved.  
ix. There was not a blade of grass left on the farm.  
x. Locusts were going to be like bad weather.

**3. Answer the following questions.**

- i. What are locusts?  
ii. Why did the farmers throw wet leaves on fire?  
iii. What was the desire of every farmer?  
iv. Did Margaret know what to do to keep the locusts away?  
v. What was the condition of trees?  
vi. How did old Stephen treat the stray locust which he found on his shirt?  
vii. Are the hoppers different from the locusts?  
viii. Did Margaret lose heart on the loss of crops?

- ix. Why are the locusts compared with bad weather?
- x. Why did the men eat their supper with good appetites?

**4. Answer the following questions in 50 - 100 words.**

- i. How did the farmers try to prevent the main swarm of locusts from landing on their farms?
- ii. Why, even after all the crops were destroyed, did the men continue to fight the swarm?
- iii. What was the condition of the land when the locusts had moved to the south?
- iv. What are the measures the farmers should have taken to save their crops? Give five suggestions.
- v. Write a note on the character of Margaret.

**5. Write down the correct form of the verb in each sentence.**

**Example:** The servants came out and (gaze).

The servants came out and gazed.

- i. Stephen (yell) at the house boy.
- ii. Margaret (see) the smoke of fire rising all around.
- iii. Old Smith had (has) his crops eaten to the ground.
- iv. The sunlight (come) down distorted.
- v. The earth (seem) to be moving.

**6. Punctuate the following lines.**

all the crops finished nothing left he said but the gongs were still beating the men still shouting and margaret asked why do you go on with it then

**7. Fill in the blanks by using the preposition given in bracket.**

(at, on, off, in, over)

- i. They could see the labourers pointing \_\_\_\_\_ the hills.
- ii. Every farmer hoped the locusts would go \_\_\_\_\_ to the next.
- iii. The main swarm showed \_\_\_\_\_ dense black cloud.
- iv. Those beggars can eat every leaf \_\_\_\_\_ the farm.
- v. A tree down the slope leaned \_\_\_\_\_ the ground.

**8. Read the following passage and answer the questions given at the end.**

Margaret was wondering what she could do to help. She did not know. Then up came old Stephen from the lands. "We're finished, Margaret, finished! Those beggars can eat every leaf and blade off the farm in half an hour! And it is only early afternoon – if we can make enough smoke, make enough noise till the sun goes down, they'll settle somewhere else perhaps...." And then: "Get the kettle going. It's thirsty work, this."

- i. Why did Margaret wonder?      ii. What did old Stephen say?
- iii. What did he desire?