

IN PRAISE OF MUD

By Mary Scott



COULD my expression have been singularly fatuous as I gazed out of the window? I was, as a matter of fact, thinking nothing more profound than that winter, after all, has its advantages, when a voice roused me from this optimistic reverie and the Man of the House asked with some alarm, "What on earth are you thinking about that makes you look so cheerful?" With a smile that I am sure was smug I retorted that I was merely counting my blessings, only to receive the crushing rejoinder that if I could see any of them out of that window I must be sickening for something.

But here he was wrong. It may not be a very inspiring view; as I have told you, at this time of year it is mainly composed of bush and of mud, with, as foreground, a convalescent home for sick sheep; but for all that there were small blessings to be counted. They might not appeal to some people as such, but to many a farmer's wife they compensate for all sorts of practical difficulties, as well as for the disadvantages of isolation and monotony.

Peace

First and foremost, there is peace. The Lake Isle of Innesfree is metropolitan compared to the bush in mid-winter. Peace comes dropping slow there largely because one is entirely inaccessible to all the people one likes best. Behind that sea of mud even relations can be successfully held at bay; no gossip of the district can penetrate that barrier.

During that "open season" that every backblocks woman knows so well, we are consoled and upheld by the thought that if summer comes winter cannot be far behind. When we are living laborious days, endeavouring to combine in one inadequate person the functions of housemaid, cook, farm rouseabout, entertainer, hostess, and journalist; when we rise a little earlier every morning—until the question will intrude, "Why go to bed at all?"—in order that we may have more time to give to our guests during the day; when, surrounded by high-brow friends, we have cooked for days to an accompanying motif of Socialism, or baked for a week to a rousing chorus of Imperialism; when, in short, we have merely fulfilled the ordinary vocations of a farmer's wife in summer, then we think with passionate longing of the day when the road will be deep in mud and we

cannot possibly have any visitors, nor can any social duties be thrust upon us.

Then, a will o' the wisp, dances in front of badgered eyes the promise of these winter evenings. However bleak the nor'-easterly there is always that to look forward to. As we battle in and out in gumboots and oilskin after hungry lambs, horses that will lose their covers, and hens that will lay away, we dream of that moment when we draw up our chairs to a roaring fire and reach for the book that has been waiting all day. At last we are blessedly safe from all intrusion; no one can demand our presence at a Church Social ("if only the road were better!"); no beaming friends can arrive on the doorstep with a surprise party on the one night when we are out of kerosene and sitting by candle-light ("we would have loved to look you up last night, but for the mud"); no children can be parked with us for the night while their parents go to a dance ("we would have had them, but I'm afraid your car couldn't get in!"). We are entirely safe.

(Interlude: HE: What are you writing so enthusiastically? SHE: Saying how nice the backblocks are in the winter. HE: All very well; you don't have to push that wretched car when we have to go out; you don't have to put on chains or go back for a draught horse; you only have to sit there and explain how you happened to get into that hole. SHE: You know how tired you get of visitors, though you don't have to feed them; you don't have to take them out; you don't have to rush home and finish the housework; you only have to sit and chat pleasantly to them in the evenings. Well, you don't have to do even that now. HE: Oh, well, never mind about that. But you should be more careful what you say in praise of mud — just when I'm trying so hard to get them to metal it. They'll quote it as a reason for doing nothing again. SHE: It won't make any difference; it never does. . . .)

Distractions, Too

Of course, one cannot expect the farmer to be as enthusiastic about winter's blessings as his wife. His evenings are never quite as secure. Stock have an unpleasant way of refusing to observe the forty-hour week and of requesting veterinary attention at odd

hours. There are all sorts of attractive little sidelines, too, that can claim his attention. For example, will that cover hold on the haystack in this wind and is this torrential downpour going to burst the flood-gate in the cow paddock? Moreover, the outside world occasionally has the temerity to intrude on his evening fastness; there comes a ring at the telephone and the usual sharp argument ensues between husband and wife as to whose business this will prove. "It'll be someone wanting to talk; sure to be for you," he says. "It's about that black polled bull; I'm certain of it," she retorts, and turns another page. When the ring has gone three times they both rise simultaneously and furiously to answer it; it turns out to be an S.O.S. for him. There is illness three miles further on, will he try to get through to the doctor? Their telephone is working badly.

Grumbling is silenced; this is the one intrusion that both admit without demur. The telephone call does not discharge his responsibilities; in an hour's time you see him donning oilskin and sou'-wester, searching for horses in dark and rain, that he may meet the doctor at the corner and bring him the last miles that are impassable by car. Such an interruption he does not grudge. But he speaks less kindly of the passing stranger who has attempted the clay road and is stuck half-a-mile away. He frankly dislikes the visitor who appears on the doorstep asking for a spade or a horse or a strong right arm. One and all must be offered, it is true, but not always graciously.

Also Inspiration

"Yes," he concedes from his side of the hearth, "Winter is certainly a good time for your writing; such perfect peace. Now, in town you would be interrupted." . . . As he speaks he is turning the knob of the wireless, doubtless intending to cheer her with soft music, to aid her inspiration with gentle strains of 'cello or organ. "He's done it. . . . He's done it. . . . It's an octopus clamp. . . . Now he's got him. . . . Oh, a real beauty. . . . The sound you hear is A's head banging on the mat." . . . The farmer smiles gently and settles himself more comfortably into his chair.

Yes, there is always the peace and quiet of the winter evenings.