



like the Star of Bethlehem, bells ringing and echoing across the valleys, and Midnight Mass with the little figures grouped around the Crib, Joseph and Mary and the Shepherds, the Sheep and the Oxen worshipping the Babe lying on its bed of hay; and the reverent hush of the people kneeling inside the Church, exalted and mysterious with the awe and marvel of this Birth.

It never seemed like that here.

THE old woman straightened her back painfully as she rose from her task. She liked working in the garden. Here alone, it seemed to her, did she belong. Her brown hands were loving on the earth, and the earth was prodigal in return. All peasants are the same. Father and Mother and Country and Flag, the brown earth is to them, and the sun and the rain and the wind and the storm are the elemental forces that preside over the Sacrament of their Communion.

From the paddocks below the house she could hear the sound of the dogs barking as they rounded up the cattle for milking.

The fat New Zealand cattle had never seemed quite real to her. It always seemed just faintly incredible that cows should have these rich pastures to graze in. The few cows they had had at Home were always hand fed. She could remember the tingling cold of the Winter mornings, when they would go out early to look for food for the animals. How precious a green thing growing was in that poor country, where the smallest patch of earth was holy as the Bread of God. How lovingly it was cherished. So different from here, where you might see green field on green field, stretching as far as your eyes could scan.

No. She could never quite believe the lushness of it all. The cows—the green fields. They were like the words she could never loose from her tongue—the hard English speech that cut between her and the people around her, walling her out from their friendly ways.

When she visited the township with her husband, the women would stop to speak to them in the street. She could smile back, say a few halting words, but never the flood that was at her tongue to tell them all the things she would like to say. How kind they were. How much she liked them.

It was always Ivan who could talk to the people in the stores, explain to them just what she wanted. She always felt very proud to hear him saying the difficult English words. To her simple mind it seemed a very great accomplishment. She would listen to him, catching the sense of a word, here and there, a secret smile of pride trembling on her mouth. The people here would see he was so clever. They would forgive her for being so stupid.

WITH the dignity of the humble and self-effacing, Mara accepted the fact that she was only an ignorant, old woman, who knew nothing else but to cook the meals and bake the bread; to do things around the house and work in the garden. Sometimes when she was looking at Ivan reading the newspaper, she wished she could read it too. Long ago, she had tried to learn, but it was no use. The letters jumped up at her and gave her a headache, so now she only looked at the pictures. The wonderfully dressed ladies. Whatever would you do if you had such clothes to wear? You couldn't churn butter or milk a cow in a dress like that; but Mara accepted them as she accepted all the other facts of life. There were ladies, and there were people who had to work. God had so ordained it.

Now she could see the cows stringing untidily into the yard. There was Ivan rounding the bend. He called to the dogs and his voice caressed them and the cows and the warmth of the summer afternoon; the whole glory of his possessions was in the beautiful solemnity of his voice as it echoed across the fields.

As Mara stood there watching him, it came to her that they could never leave the farm. Her roots were entwined with Ivan's, and his roots were deep and wide in these acres.

In some mysterious way he was bound up with them, so that it seemed to her that the very sap that ran in his veins was drawn from the same spring that flowed through his land. This was Ivan's place, and she had no other place than by his side. Together they had come the long journey across the years, and at the end they would lie together in this earth.

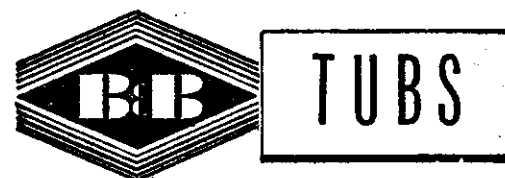
In a gesture that was at once acceptance and renunciation, the old woman bent again to her task.



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