

The Time My Father Bought a Farm

Written for "The Listener"
by L.M.N.

I'll always remember the time my old man bought a farm down Waiomu way. For a while we lived surrounded by 480 acres of our own land. It did not matter on what part of the hill you stood the surrounding countryside looked like the Garden of Eden after the creation. My brother Bobbie once described it in fancier words than I could find: "The encircling hills, the great dome of the sky, star-lit at night and blue or cloud filled during the day, the dark green of the bush-clad slopes, the light green of the pasture land, the scattered tree-shaded farmhouses perched on hills like ours or tucked away in hollows, and dominating all incomparable Mt. Karioi—it was something to take the breath away. And as if this were not enough in front of the house there was an upper arm of the Whangaroa harbour, the mood of which changed with every hour."

If I had ever thought about such things in those days the laws of economics would have seemed very strange to me. Some of our land was in bush, most of it was in gorse, blackberry and noxious weeds, and a part was in grass. It looked pretty much like the grass in any other place, but when consumed and digested by our cows that mysterious process that turns grass into butter-fat failed to take place. Here we were happily situated in this excellent spot, but due to this odd deficiency in the grass, or it may have been in the animals themselves, we had no money, none of those paper notes and silver discs which were apparently so necessary to existence. We had every good thing—health, and a beautiful place to live in, and a boundless capacity for enjoyment, and a love of our fellowmen—but no hard cash.

When Dad first saw this view he just naturally fell in love with it. Another man might have been just as enthusiastic until he had had time to do a little mature reflection, but that was not Dad's style. Hearing that the place was for sale he went right in and bought it. It was just as if he had gone into a picture shop, and had asked for a pleasing landscape to be wrapped up and handed to him. Dad did not stamp around looking for defects, he did not test the fertility of the soil, he hardly noticed the deplorable condition of the fences and outbuildings. It was as if he had said: "I like this place, and henceforth I will make my abode here." Dad just naturally took for granted that life in such a setting would be uncomplicated and full of simple pleasures.

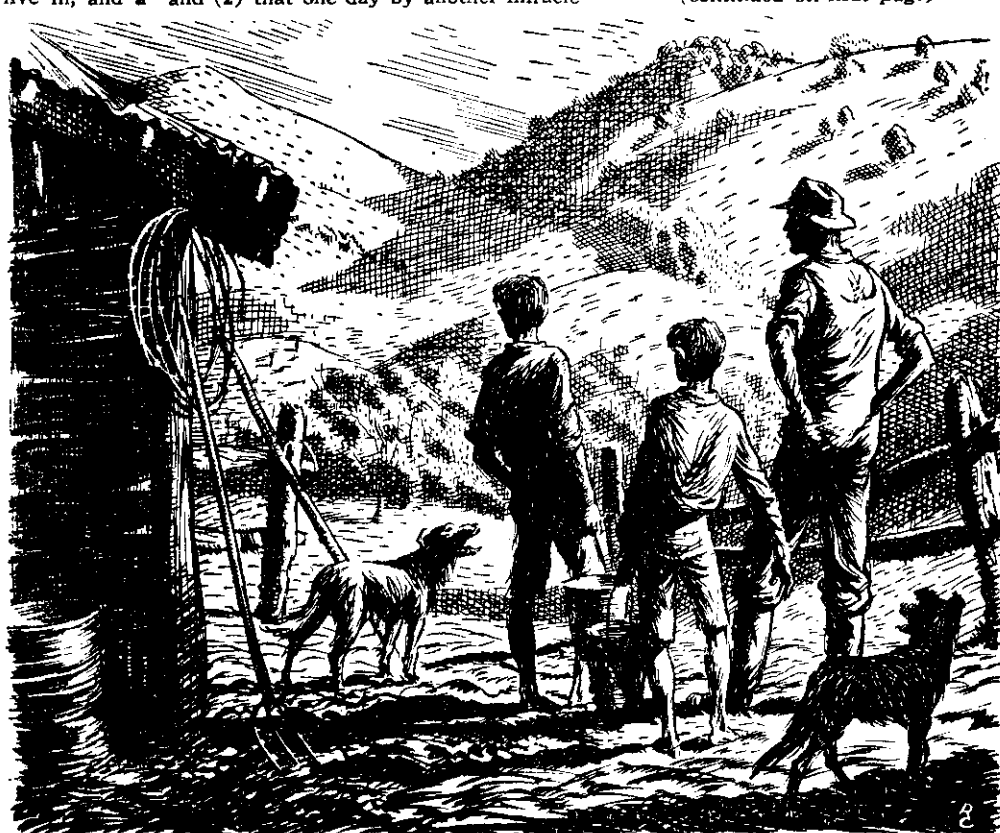
WE moved in a week after Dad first saw this place, and Dad was so proud of our view that right from the start he got into the habit of standing around and saying: "Just look at that view, will you? Just look at it!" One day he said something of this sort to Auntie Ella, but he picked an unfortunate moment because Auntie was standing in six inches of cold mud with leaking gumboots on and she had just tried to leg-rope mean vixenish little Rosy who never permitted any mere human to impose this indignity upon her. My Auntie looked at the view slowly and deliberately, and she thought it was about time she gave her brother some advice. She said that when she looked at a view she liked to be sitting in a comfortable chair on a hotel verandah with her best clothes on and a few lamb chops tucked safely inside her. She advised Dad to leave this starvation place and go on relief, and she said that an unvaried diet of dried peas and boiled rice was almost sure to have a deleterious effect on the human system. My old man took no notice of this advice, and just for the record he did not go to school long enough to find out what deleterious meant.

Dad was not by any means a lazy man, and sometimes he would almost work himself to death, but he had two favourite hobby-horses and he rode them for all he was worth. One was "looking over the place," and the other was "planning for the future." His favourite dreams were (1) that one morning he would go into the shed and find that by some miracle the old rusty junk had been replaced by a big yellow tractor and (2) that one day by another miracle

he would acquire some capital in the form of a thousand-pound note. Dad had a wonderful faith in the fertility of our soil, and he said that with the help of this tractor and the capital he would be able to turn our property into a paradise that would support a dozen families. He was always crossing and recrossing the farm to "see how things were getting on," and before we had been there very long he got to know the whole 480 acres like the back of his own hand. He said that it was 480 acres of the most beautiful country in the world. When Dad got that big yellow tractor he was going to start right in using it in a furious burst of energy, but he said over and over again that he was never going to put "her" in the bush. The bush he loved best of all, and it was his intention to preserve it for posterity.

My old man looked on tractors with almost the same reverence with which some people regard pianos, and I guess he would have gone plumb crazy with joy if he had ever got one. Somehow it did you good to see him standing in the bush, and looking down at the Shag Pool through the brown tree trunks, thinking about the day when people would drive up to look at our bush standing in the middle of the valley like a living memorial to the past. In more prosaic moments Dad would stroll over to the Top Paddock to ruminate about the best situation for the new cowshed and pig pens, and as he lovingly examined the willow-lined creek

(continued on next page)



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