

ILL FARES THE LAND

(A short story, written for "The Listener" by M.I.)

A DEEP peace blanketed the countryside, but it was the peace of apathy, not of contentment. The fields were obviously waiting for someone or something. Meanwhile they lay unresisting beneath the heat, careless whether dock or clover rooted upon them. And the docks had taken full advantage of their apathy and had overflowed from the fowl-yard to the pasture land, and from pasture land to vegetable garden. And in the vegetable garden white butterflies fluttered about without apparent purpose. At dusk they would be joined by hundreds of mosquitoes, bred in the tanks of stagnant water lying forgotten amid the tall grasses.

It was past Christmas, but the hay had not yet been cut. Instead the ducks, straying through the holes in the fence of the poultry yard, still found privacy for their nests in the tangled mass of grasses and bindweed. Did they remember that by this time last year they had been grateful for the lesser publicity of the run when the hay-cutter had shorn the fields where they once played hide and seek? Apparently not. Their mien was unruffled; they seemed to have no suspicion of approaching insecurity.

PERHAPS the ducks were right, thought Martha. Perhaps the hay would not be cut this year, unless the neighbours came to the rescue. Harry had been going to fix it up at Christmas when he came home on leave from Waiouru, but there had been no Christmas leave this year. And anyway the neighbours were in the same box themselves—the Tapleys with both sons in Egypt, and the Collinses next door unable to get their usual hired help. Mr. Collins was saying he could manage alone, but it was a big job for a man of sixty-five.

The ducks disappeared into the long grass. Hopeless to try to find their nests—they were such cunning creatures. Hateful to see the land going like this, but what could she do about it? She had her hands full looking after the house and the poultry and the children. Baby was just cutting her first tooth and inclined to be fractious, and Jimmy just old enough to fall into things, but not old enough to pick himself out of them.

Anyway she hadn't been brought up to do things on the land. If you come from a Hawke's Bay sheep farm you're too busy with the baking and the cleaning and the fruit bottling to bother much about what goes on outside. When she had come to live here after her marriage she had brought jars and jars of jam and preserves. She had been glad of it, for there was little fruit here worth the bottling. These dairy farmers—she couldn't understand them—they didn't seem to care for anything but their wretched cows. There were a few straggling plum and apple trees in the poultry run, but they were allowed to grow there only because it was assumed that the hens didn't mind. And what had once been the orchard was now the calf paddock.

If the farm had been Harry's perhaps she could have done something about it. But it was his brother Jack's, and she couldn't interfere. Jack had come home on final leave just before Christmas, and instead of spending it with the boys as most of them did he had worked from dawn to sunset and after, mending fences and repairing the cowshed. He had worried rather about the hay, but it had been too wet to cut it then. And now he was on a ship somewhere. Would he still be worrying or would he have other things to think about?

When Harry came back they would get a little holding of their own somewhere and she would have a greenhouse and an orchard and look after them herself, and Harry could keep his cows on the other side of the fence. And perhaps later on they might save some money or Dad might give Harry a share in the farm back home. Or Harry might get a job managing a station. But Harry had said "Once a dairy-farmer always a dairy-farmer," and said he didn't even like the look of sheep. But at any rate you didn't have to milk sheep twice a day, and they'd be able to get away and have holidays with the children.

THERE was a clatter of buckets from the cowshed. That would be Vera, come to do the milking. Vera had been married and away from the farm for three years now, and she and her husband had a small place the other side of the railway line. But when both her brothers had had to go into camp Vera had volunteered to come and do the milking. Nine cows too, and all hand-milked. The funny part was that Vera, although she had been brought up on the farm, had always been afraid of cows. And how the boys used to tease her about it! But now she got up at half-past four in the morning and got back from milking in time to get Ted's breakfast. Even now, though, she didn't trust cows, and put a leg rope even on old Agatha. And Ted still told the joke about Vera getting annoyed because Agatha wouldn't get out of the bale and there she was with the leg-rope still on.

When anyone commented on Vera's doing the milking she would smile and say "It's just my war effort—helping to keep the place going till the boys come back." And she would say that from the moment peace was signed she wouldn't go near a cow again. And they would all laugh at her, so she would amend it to the very instant the boys got back.

THERE was purpose now in the decorative fluttering of the white butterflies. Martha hit at one. It drifted down, a limp parachute. She noticed the docks flaunting among the cabbages. If she put the children to bed now she could get in perhaps three hours in the vegetable garden. She had planned to do the baking this evening and get those parcels off for Harry and Jack, but that could wait. She'd write and tell them she'd cleaned up the vegetable garden instead.

A Man In The Kitchen

IT is hard to believe that Alexis Soyer, who lived to be known as The Gastronomic Regenerator, has never been written about before. This French cook was undoubtedly a man of genius, and perhaps he knew it, but he accepted the responsibilities of his exceptional endowments gracefully, lightly and with good humour. He devised banquets for princes, and soup kitchens for the destitute. His recipes and his designs for stoves may truly be said to have saved thousands of lives. He did as much for the feeding of the soldiers in the Crimea (where he went at his own demand) as Florence Nightingale did for the nursing, and he did it all with efficiency and good sense that were enhanced by an extravagant but charming display of dignified idiosyncrasy. His books, meanwhile, sold in tens of thousands, and were only equalled in popularity by his sauces. At the time of the Great Exhibition he took Gore House (where the Albert Hall now stands) and made as fantastic a fashionable restaurant of it as has ever been heard of. Crowds flocked to it, and a fortune might have been made. At the very height of its popularity, however, Soyer



ALEXIS SOYER, IN 1857

closed it overnight because a published (and unjust) criticism expressed a doubt of its moral effect. He was born in 1809 and died in 1858.

(A talk on Alexis Soyer, prepared by Dorothy Neal, was broadcast by 2YA on December 31 and will be repeated soon by other National stations.)

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