

# WELL FARES THE LAND

## The Edifying Tale of Martha, Who Wedded the Soil

(Remember Martha? She was the small farm girl, whose husband was away at the front and who spent all her time looking after her two children and her house and her poultry and a few spare minutes each day watching the docks grow in the vegetable garden. But last time we met her she had already started to reform. She had decided to spend the evening weeding the vegetable garden instead of baking cakes to send to her husband overseas. By special request from a correspondent last week, "M.I." has decided to carry Martha's reform to its logical conclusion. NOW READ ON.)

**D**USK spread its warm fingers over the land, pushing still further into the soil the bent figure of Martha as she crouched at the edge of the forest of docks. She had been there for three hours. She had weeded half a row. But she did not despair. The blood of the pioneer women of New Zealand beat in her veins—the blood of those women who, with bare hands and ten children clinging to their skirts, had hewn a home for themselves and their dear ones out of the virgin forest.

The pile of uprooted docks beside her grew. The long line in front of her steadily diminished. A deep exultant joy surged up inside her, born of the

heady intoxication of her closeness to the teeming earth. From inside the house came a thin wail—the cry of her latest-born cutting its latest tooth—but for once Martha was oblivious. Her mother instinct was overlaid by a deeper more primeval earth-lust and the dark passionate currents of the earth-life held her enchained.

**S**HE did not know what hour it was when she straightened her weary back. She only knew she had weeded three-quarters of a row. She staggered into the house. The children, worn out by crying, had fallen asleep. The dinner dishes, with their congealed fat, were still lying on the kitchen bench. She fell into bed.

Next morning Martha was up at five. In spite of her aching muscles she swept through the house like a whirlwind, leaving it clean and shining as the inside of a separator. Then out once more into the garden.

There were thirty rows of vegetables in the garden. It took five hours to do a row. Martha calculated that it would take her three weeks to finish the weeding, and, allowing three hours a day for housework, this would still give her an odd half-hour here and there to do odd jobs round the place, such as planting out an orchard, milking the cows, and mending the hole in the poultry run fence. And once the vegetable garden was under control she might be able to start getting the hay in.

**T**HE three weeks passed. Martha had kept to her schedule and finished the last dock of the last row at 7.55 p.m. on the twenty-first day after her conversion. With a deep thankfulness in her heart she rose from her knees and surveyed her work. The onions, their weeding just completed, were immaculate. But what of the French beans and the carrots? With such zeal had she applied herself to each day's allotted task that she had paid no attention to the work of previous days. The beans and carrots were completely hidden by a great forest of docks stretching on all sides of them. The tops of the next two rows of rhubarb could barely be seen above the encroaching weeds. The next few rows of spinach were clearly visible rising from a weedy underground. In the rows nearest Martha the encroaching weeds formed merely a green carpet round the roots of the red beet.

But Martha's spirit was uncowed. There were still a few moments of daylight. She marched to the other end of the vegetable plot and began once more on the beans.

**I**T was many days since she had had time to go as far as the front gate. She could not know that in the letter-box lay letters from Harry—plaintive letters in which he confessed himself worried that he had not heard from her, in which he wondered why he had not received the parcels she must have sent him. A neighbour brought them out to her one sweltering afternoon in February just as she was starting on the rhubarb for the third time. With difficulty Martha wrenched herself from the close embrace of the soil and stretched out an earth-stained hand for the envelopes.

Remorse struck her. From the evening of her momentous decision to weed the vegetable garden instead of doing up that parcel for Harry, the lure of the soil had crowded out all other considerations. For seven weeks now he had had no word from her—was still ignorant of the great moment that had changed her life for the better. She saw herself as she had been—a worthless, spineless parasite with no interests apart from her husband, her children, and her household duties, and with no conception of her duty towards her country and the land from which all derived their life. How pleased he would be now, how proud of her!

TO THE EDITOR

## Women In The Country

Sir,—In your last issue "Aurora" (Otorohanga) complains that my picture of Martha in "Ill Fares the Land" is a wicked libel and a slur on the women of Hawke's Bay. "Aurora" evidently believes that one should write what is pleasant rather than what is true. I admit that Martha is a purely fictitious character, but that does not alter the fact that there are many people like Martha. Some of them may even come from Hawke's Bay.

I admit that there are many women on farms to-day who are doing their best, with a great measure of success, to keep things going until the men come home. I admit that there are many women, on farms and off, who, in spite of their lack of previous experience, are performing miracles to get necessary work done. And even spineless Martha at the end of my story shows signs of being influenced by a desire to re-organise her life round the central fact of the war and its needs. But I was stung by some of "Aurora's" allegations. I decided that in spite of Martha's unpromising beginning she, too, should become one of these super-women with ten children hand-milking twenty-four cows a day and cherishing a large garden and orchard.

But when I started again on Martha I found she wasn't up to specifications. She didn't have ten children, and I didn't see how she could until her husband came home. And the farm was only twelve acres and wouldn't run more than eight cows. The orchard would have had to be planted, and as it wasn't her farm she would hardly reap the fruits thereof. But, in spite of this, I determined to make something of her, and her subsequent story appears on this page.

Actually I don't like her as well now as I did before. She's unpleasantly like her Biblical namesake, and I think the Lord meant something when He said that Mary had chosen the better part.

—"M.I." (Wellington).

That night she dashed off a line or two to Harry telling him of her new life and warning him to expect no more parcels. Before she fell into bed she looked at herself in the mirror, a thing she hadn't had time to do for weeks. Harry would be pleased at the change in her. Gone were those kittenish curves, gone that smooth white skin (she never had time to put cold cream on it now). Instead there stared back at her a creature lean and brown of limb. There was added purpose in the squaring of the jaw, and a determined light in the once soft eyes.

She now wrote to Harry regularly once a week, explaining that she could not spare the time to write every day as

(Continued on next page)



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