

My Land Army Years

At the time I was living with married friends at Enderby near Leicester. Maurice was a farm foreman and, with them, I occupied a cottage on the estate. Sandy, his wife, and I had been friends for many years, she said she regarded me as the sister she never had. Her family consisted of six brothers and herself, whilst I was one of six girls with one brother.

I had booked to spend a holiday in Devon and was dubious about going in view of the possibility of war. Sandy saw no reason why I should not; as she said, "it might not happen, and there is no one dependant on you, so why not go?" I heard it announced whilst there, but saw no reason to dash back so, with some others of the same mind, I stayed the week out.

The printing trade was initially considered a 'reserve occupation' but, as with other industries, it wasn't long before the 'reservations' were lifted, which released the workers for war work. After Dunkirk, things ground to a halt anyway.

Came the time when I presented myself at the local Women's Land Army (WLA) office. Miss D.M. Elliott handled the taking of particulars and fitting me out with uniform. She and I were at the office for the first time, both starting a new job, she as secretary, and I as a 'rookie' land girl. We both happened to be Dorothy's, thus starting off 'in step'. Keeping in touch with her girls, visiting them at work and supervising their welfare, gave her great pleasure but, inevitably, her brood grew too big for her to do this as often as she would have liked. Pressure in the office kept her tied up.

At an arranged date I met the girl with whom I would train, a little younger and venturing from home for the first time. Mary was her name. We were sent to train at a smallish farm run by a man and wife, with one regular hand and an old chappie who helped out when needed. We shared a room on the third floor up and there was still another floor above us. The house also had a solid stone cellar, complete with small range. This area was to become quite familiar to me in the next few days, as Mr and Mrs W. and I listened to the bumps and bangs of enemy activity keeping us from our beds.

The day started at 6.00am, when we had breakfast, and then went to the milking shed with stool and bucket.

THE FIRST MORNING,
BRIGHT AND EARLY.



ROOKETTES



DRAWING A 'PINT!'

As an onlooker, I stood watching, fascinated when the herd thundered through the gateway from the road and into the shed. Noting the heaving mass of flailing hooves, horns and tails, we were suddenly shocked into action by a voice which called out, "Well, go and tie them up then!" I caught a glimpse of Mary's face which reminded me of Daniel going into the lion's den! The voice continued, "Tie them round the neck with the chain you'll find beside each stall, then start to milk with a gentle squeeze and pull."

We sat down, and soon found out that one had to work at getting milk from the cows, it was not quite so simple as turning on a tap. Forearms and wrists ached long before much milk appeared in the bucket and, what's more, those mucky tails were keeping the flies off us too! We gradually became more proficient; we had to, for it happened without fail twice daily. Possibly the cows themselves were the real controllers of the improved milk yield, they could not hold back indefinitely.

At this time, July/August 1940, the Germans were trying their hardest to get to our industrial cities, and a naval gun on the borders of Derby, Nottingham and Leicester counties, seemed to be on our doorstep, and was noisily instrumental in preventing them doing just this.

It also banished sleep with its deep-throated boom which continued throughout the night, and into the early hours of morning, keeping up a barrage until 4.30am. Then people came up from cellars and shelters wherever they had sat it out to start work again. Moonlit nights were not welcome in wartime, they merely heralded another onslaught from the enemy who could see their targets so much more clearly.

In Germany of course, the enemy was us, and their fears were ours. Lorries full of soldiers or supplies would go rushing through the night, with tanks rumbling along as fast as they could go, while bombs fell, making the earth tremble. Mary, in these conditions, decided she would sooner be at home with her parents, so she gave up Land Army training and became a postwoman, working from home in Leicester.

An Irish girl came in her place, whom we thought somewhat scatty. She just did not realise the deadly seriousness of the situation: because of her carelessness in drawing the blackout curtain in our bedroom, air-raid wardens hammered on the

front door during one raid shouting, "Put that light out!" just as a bomb dropped too close for comfort. That did shock her.

Miss E. came to find out why Mary wished to opt out of the WLA, but I told her of our frequent disturbed nights, adding that I also thought she was homesick, as this had been her first time away from home.

This month of training was to test our suitability for the job and to discover if we had chosen the right media for our war effort. We found there was a place for all of us. My month of training was at an end.

I was sent with Pam, another land girl, to Cathorpe, the other side of the city to where I had done my printing apprenticeship. We were now about 10 miles from Coventry, and approximately three from Rugby—having moved from one lively spot to another. Here we lodged with the herdsman and his wife and baby, in a little stone cottage, each paying 16/- a week for board and lodgings. Our wage was 32 shillings per week and we were allowed to have Saturday afternoon and Sunday off in turn.

Mr W. lived at the farmhouse with just a housekeeper; his wife I understood from Bill had a ranch in Canada. He was a massive man, and again, according to Bill, had been known to break a horse's back with his weight of 18 stone.

The cows were only 'stripped out' by hand, machines did the bulk of the milking, but it was soon discovered that cash seemed a bit tight. The tubes all wanted replacing as they were perished, and caused the cows discomfort, so that they sometimes kicked them off. Then milk went gurgling down the drain, much to the disgust of the boss if he happened to be in the shed at that moment. Sometimes too, a neatly placed hoof left an imprint on one's person, and one found oneself under the belly of a stallmate.

A memento that I carried round for years after was a broken front tooth. This happened as I was tying a cow at milking time; she raised her head from the trough just as my hands met to fasten the chain and the horny part of her head caught me in the mouth. As cows do, she continued to chew, impervious to the fact that I nursed a cut lip.