LIFE IN THE LAND ARMY

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Better Little Book

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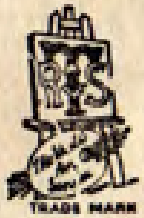
LIFE IN THE LAND ARMY

By

C. FALCON



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A very busy season.

LIFE IN THE LAND ARMY

"Oh, what bliss to take off one's shoes and . . .

"It began with call at 6.30 this morning.

"A strange bed and 'planes passing over frequently, a hurried breakfast and then . . .

"At 8.15 the Supervisor is showing us the nursery with seedling fir trees. 'I want you to weed these,' he says, and departs.

"Somehow we hadn't expected weeding as our first dose of forestry.

"But the midges expected us. I was thankful for my long-sleeved sweater, but they had no respect for faces, and crept

inquisitively inside our dungarees. But when the sun came up more strongly the midges departed.

"At 10.15 we stopped for breakfast. Lunch was officially at 1.30, but we called it 1.15. Lunch by a moorland stream—all peaty and very sweet to drink. Rolling moors, heather and gorse; fir-covered slopes and a bubbling stream with a little bridge.

"After lunch we began to ache in several spots, so sometimes we sat along the rows, sometimes we knelt. But the ground was very, very hard. So we stood up, legs apart, and bent down.

"One man came and had a

look at us and had a smoke, but we had a suspicion that he came to examine us, not our work. Later a ganger came round and said we had done a good job. We left at 5.15 quite convinced we *had* done a good job, with testimonies in every joint!

"But I had earned my first day's pay as a Land Girl. I thrust my hands into the pockets of my dungarees and sang. 5.30, 5.45, 6—we were not home yet, but there was no rush for Tubes and buses, no fight for a place. The music of the stream was still in my ears, and the sun in the west was lighting the heather to an autumn gold . . ."

That's an extract from a Land Girl's first letter to a friend.

Typical of many thousands.

I have often listened to inquirers answering the question, "Why do you want to join the Land Army?"

Sometimes the answer is: "Because I am going to marry a farmer when the war is over," sometimes "because I love country life and hope to make farming my career," or "I'm engaged to an Australian (or a Canadian, a New Zealander or a South African) and shall go out there after the war. I think the knowledge will be useful to me."

So it will; girls in the Land Army learn a profession while being paid for the work they do.

And what a splendidly healthy

life this Service offers. It's hard work, make no mistake about that; you do a man's job, which is why you must be physically fit when you are enrolled. Town girls whose civilian jobs have been sedentary may feel very tired for the first week or two, but it's a healthy tiredness that soon passes, and I've seen thousands of such girls looking not only fitter and happier, but infinitely more attractive, after a week or two in the Service.

They begin to use muscles which they may have hardly ever exercised before, so naturally they are going to feel the strain temporarily.

The country girl has it easier

at the start; but once that initial period is over the town girl will feel on top of the world.

"I've put on weight!"

"I feel simply fine; I've twice the energy I used to have."

"I never catch cold now, and I've lost that flabby fat!"

These are the kind of remarks Land Girls make to me, and the girls' looks bear out their statements. They are rosy-cheeked, sun-burned or browned by the keen winds, where a few weeks ago they were pale and, though healthy enough, lacking the tone-up which exercise and physical work give.

This increase of health is an investment for life—and Land Girls get paid for it! The

Forestry.

minimum rate varies a little in different counties, for the wages are fixed by the County Agricultural Wages Boards, but in no case are earnings in the Women's Land Army less than 38/- a week. A girl works 48 hours a week in winter, 50 in summer—and remunerative overtime if the farmer requires it, since the seasons don't work office hours, and the all-important food production is our first consideration.

Leave is a matter for arrangement with the particular farmer. Girls engaged in market gardening usually have Saturday afternoon and Sunday free, though in rotation there may be an hour or two Sunday's work in con-

nection with glasshouses and frames. Dairy-workers usually get a free half-day a week. This means that though they have rather less free time (for cows must be milked and stock fed whatever the day), they earn more, for they are working overtime, and Sunday overtime is paid at a slightly higher rate.

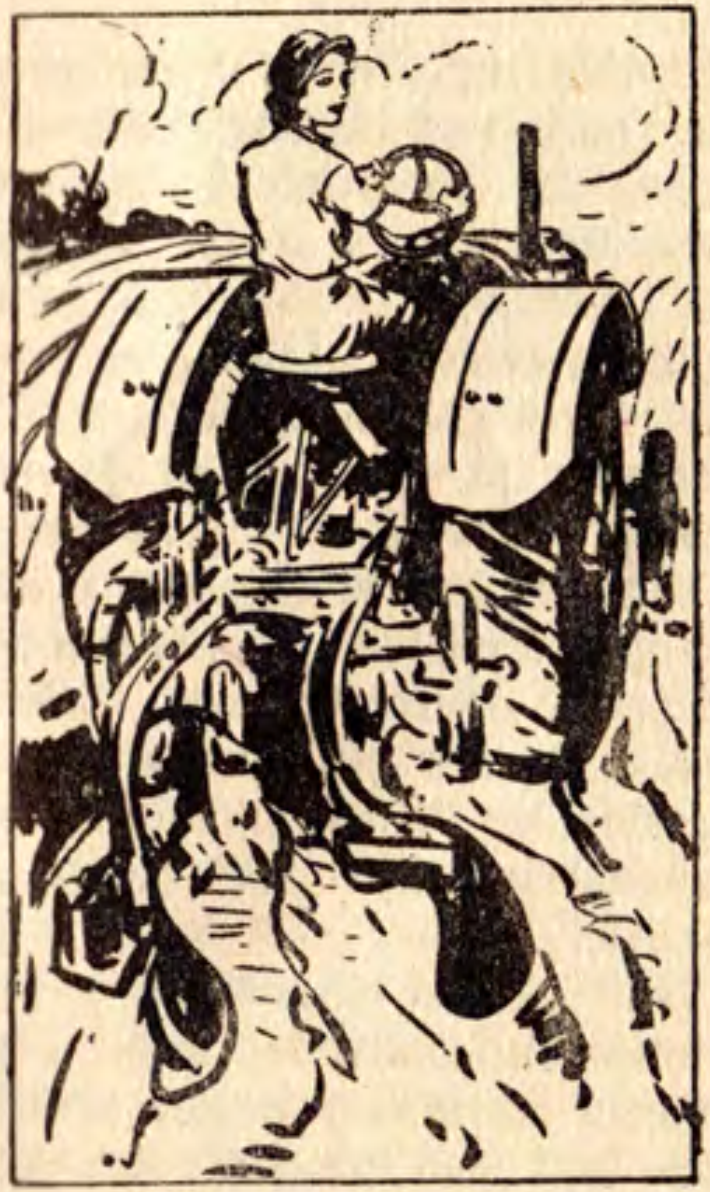
When you have done six months' good service you are due for a short leave, and if you are working more than 20 miles from your home, the Land Army supplies a free return travelling warrant.

Farmers are generally only too anxious to let new Land Girls get accustomed to the work slowly, but it may be that

you arrive on a farm in a very busy season, haymaking or harvesting, for example, when every moment of good weather must be utilised. If so, don't let it dishearten you. Remember, you are feeding the nation; if *you* drop out, someone may starve. There is nothing static and monotonous about farming —it's always been an adventure.

Then, if you will bear in mind the difference between the farmer's outlook and your own, it will help you in those early weeks. A job which may seem light and easy to the farmer often presents itself in an entirely different aspect to you, who have spent your life in a city.

"My first afternoon," one



Tractor driving.

girl told me, "the farmer gave me the job of leading the horse down the furrows. I can see now he thought it the easiest job going—sort of thing a country child could do; but our horse is a great big shire, and I don't mind saying now I was scared of him. Every moment I thought he was going to plant his gigantic hoof on my wee foot. Now, of course, I know differently; I know old Hector is the gentlest and most lovable horse in the country. He's a good friend."

The Land Army is very human and understanding. The county in which a girl enrols has first call on her services, for this means that she is nearer

home. So if there are farmers in her county needing Land Girls she will be offered local employment, and usually be expected to accept it.

There may, however, be no local demand just at that time. Then she may be offered employment elsewhere in England or Wales—Scotland has its own Women's Land Army. Because the demand for volunteers fluctuates and varies, girls are expected to be "mobile."

They may state a preference for a certain county, just as they may say what kind of land work they prefer to do. Everything possible is done to meet their wishes, though no guarantee can be given.

If, however, a girl asks to work with animals, she will in all probability be offered such work. If she has no interest in animals she will be placed in market gardening.

Transfers to other forms of farm work are sympathetically considered if a girl is especially anxious to change her job.

It's advisable, however, for girls to stay in their first employment for some months, for then they earn a reputation for reliability. Then, if they apply for a transfer, with a good report to their credit, a move can generally be arranged.

The district representative is an important person in the Land Girl's life. She is a

resident of the district where the girl is employed, and her welfare is the representative's first consideration. She inspects billets before Land Girls arrive, and calls to see new girls within a few days of their starting work. If there are any queries she sorts them. She puts girls in touch with other Land Girls in the neighbourhood. If sisters or friends ask to work together everything is done to facilitate this. In market gardening it is often arranged.

The owner of a small mixed farm may ask for one girl, thinking that if she does well, he will employ a second.

You may be the first girl a farmer employs. If so the good

name of the Land Army is in your hands; make a success of your job, and the farmer says to a brother farmer at market:

"I've got a fine girl working for me; good as any man, she is. I'm thinking of taking on another one now." That's a grand reward for a girl who till recently was perhaps a typist, shop assistant, machinist or a worker in some luxury trade. And here is another farmer's opinion of his Land Girl: "She can do anything now on the farm; she can milk and rear calves with the best of men. In 1940 she reared us 44 calves and did not lose one. In addition to this she is good at working horses, attending the

In the big dairies.

birth of lambs, and expert at hedge trimming. She can build stacks and thatch them, and next year we are teaching her tractor driving."

Land Girls live very happily; some billeted in farmhouses, in cottages on the farm, or in the nearest village. If you have a bicycle, it will be a friend, for transport is not always up to town standards. Billets are found and catering and cooking are done for Land Girls, because it is intended that the whole of their working hours shall be spent on land work.

Some of the girls engaged in forestry live in camps. Many girls live in hostels, and I know a gang of mobile tractor drivers

who live in caravans. There are six in the gang, and they move from farm to farm with their tractors as required. They live two together in a caravan, and when they move, hitch the caravan on to the back of the tractor, and off they go. These girls cater and cook for themselves. This is the romance of the open road, in truth, and what grand memories these girls share!

In market gardening and field work the job changes with the season, so that training is not a great deal of use. It is much more satisfactory to start on the land and learn as you go. Therefore you will seldom be given preliminary training in this branch. Tractor drivers

and dairy-workers may receive a month's training at a training centre or on a specially selected farm. During this month the trainee receives 10/- a week pocket money, and her billeting expenses are paid.

One point that worries some recruits is—shall I be unemployed between training and being sent to permanent employment? But there are no awkward gaps in the Land Army scheme. Girls are not called up till there is a job for them to go to either directly or after training, and for this reason civilian work is continued until the chance comes.

Town girls often have the mistaken idea that they may

Care of stock.

be "put off" during the winter. But farmers undertake to employ them, if they are satisfactory, throughout the year, and to pay their wages whatever the weather. Yes, and even wild weather can be magnificent in the country. One girl told me that seeing the dawn in the country restored her sense of values after the War had given her a particularly raw deal.

If Land Girls are unable to work they are eligible for National Health Insurance. They are also provided for under the Emergency Hospital scheme for transferred workers should hospital treatment be necessary. But how seldom it is, in this healthy, happy ser-

vice! The preliminary medical examination provides for the exclusion of those really unfitted for the work—and the others generally improve their physique in the first few months.

The kit—all free, of course—consists of breeches, shirts, green jersey, overcoat, oilskin, hat, dungarees, shoes, boots and gum boots, stockings, an armlet and badge; an excellent outfit, and necessary renewals are free. Girls supply their own underwear, and the wise take extra jerseys, an old mackintosh, gloves to work in, a woollen scarf and any "civvies" required. There's no need to wear uniform out of working hours.

Back to the land . . ."I used

to think it was just another slogan," one friend said to me, "but it's the grandest chance women ever had." That's how they feel about things—the spirit of the land is infectious. "The job that I'm doing now is the most worthwhile thing that I have done yet," says an office worker.

The work is enormously varied. In the big dairies, jobs include feeding, cleaning and milking the cows, care of calves, cooling and bottling of the milk, washing the milk bottles, cleaning the cowsheds. The day in this case probably starts at 5 a.m., with an hour's break at 8.0 for breakfast, an hour-and-a-half for dinner, and finish work about 5.0 p.m.

Work in glasshouses.

General farm work means care of stock—cows, horses, pigs and poultry; and work in the fields, including haymaking and harvesting. On this type of farm the job is always changing and is never dull.

Then there is market gardening; vegetable and fruit growing. You plough, dig, manure, sow and plant, do lots of hoeing, fight the thistles and weeds, pick and pack the fruit and vegetables, and late in the autumn lift the potato and root crops.

If you don't mind a hot and steamy atmosphere in summertime, you can work in glasshouses growing tomatoes and cucumbers and early vegetables.

You score during the winter, of course, for your work is in dry and warm surroundings while rain and storm lash the outside world.

Land Girls in gangs of four, with one acting as foreman, do excellent work as threshers.

Forestry is a branch of the Land Army which now comes under the Essential Works Order. This means that girls who sign on for forestry cannot change their job during the war.

In forestry, work includes lopping timber, chopping it for pit-props, and planting young trees. From doing this rougher work, girls are promoted, if they have mathematical ability, to timber measuring.

A number of Land Girls are

employed in private gardens, taking the place of men called to the Forces; also in hospital grounds, growing vegetables for the staff and patients, and looking after poultry. Employers of such girls undertake that at least 75 per cent. of their time shall be spent on food cultivation. That, after all, is our main job.

Free time when you are set down in a strange locality is not lonely. The local committee helps girls to make new friends, puts them in touch with clubs, institutes and other activities. It's wonderful how much the Land Girls manage to squeeze into their free time. No stagnation in the country for them.

Many cultivate gardens of their own after hours. One girl told me she is, in her spare time, Animal Guard on outlying farms, helps at a W.V.S. canteen, collects nature specimens, and studies Norwegian. Another has learnt shorthand and to weave, brushed up her French, and does lots of knitting. A girl employed in glasshouses occupies her spare time by running a Wolf Cub pack, taking riding lessons, designing and painting calendars, which she sells in aid of the Land Army Spitfire fund. There are rallies and parties arranged expressly for Land Girls, and districts where many girls are working soon start their own circles.

It may be at a Land Girls' rally that you are presented with your first good service badge, a half diamond in red cloth outlined in green, earned on completion of six months' service, and worn on your armlet. The diamond is completed at the end of the second six months' service; and thereafter you go on collecting half diamonds for every half-year's satisfactory service. There are to-day experienced Land Girls proudly displaying on their armlets two full diamonds, and —just as valuable and just as conspicuous—every evidence of glowing health and happiness.

TUCK'S

Better Little Book

Series (*continued*)

The Bridesmaids Wore Blue
Love's Miracle
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Why Did you Leave Me?
Faraway Lover
The Gipsy Dress
The Ghost of Greyfriars
Kid Sister
Jean Wins Through
Bandit Gang
Gipsy Soldier
Wizard's Delight
Hidden Treasure
To-morrow at Dawn
Frontier Boy
Gallows Verdict
The Blue Man
The Hole in the Wall
How to Read Hands
How to Read Handwriting
How to Read Dreams
How to Read Omens
All's Fair in Love
Give me Adventure
Wings
Home's where the Heart is

LIFE IN THE LAND ARMY