



## “A VENTURE OF FAITH” by Mrs May Redman

*A Story of the founding of the Hermanus Rudolf Steiner School.*

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{With acknowledgement to **MILADY**, of 1954}

NESTLING in the folds of the hills in the peaceful Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, near Hermanus, lies a small farm called "Dawn". The Onrust River, flowing through the valley, skirts its boundaries, and lovely old trees give welcome shade to the children dwelling in the green roofed farmhouse. There is nothing to distinguish it from the many small farms dotted along the valley. But behind this peaceful scene lies a story, not of Farming, but the story of a venture of faith born out of sorrow.

The children who live in this home come from many distant parts, and are not as other children — the good fairies had omitted to give them the gifts of grace and intellect that should be the birthright of every child and they are described as "mentally retarded" — or may be, they had made sacrifices of certain faculties to perform a task in this life — which is the belief of the great Austrian philosopher Dr. Rudolf Steiner, on whose teachings this school is based. He has said that "every life has a meaning," if this were not so, why should an All Wise Providence withhold His blessings from some and give to others with partiality and discrimination?

This story concerns one of the boys in the home, who, though unconscious of his own mission in life, has been the incentive that has brought the Hermanus Rudolf Steiner school into being. Although he lacked many faculties that would fit him for the battle of life, he had the gift of love, and his parents loved him. Like many others, they hoped against hope that some day he would develop as other children, and they spent many weary years and much money in a hopeless search for some cure, or some place where he could get the specialised training he needed. But there was no cure, and very few special schools that could help him; so his mother (who, for the purpose of this story we will call Martha, because she was troubled by many things), decided to keep him at home. His health was ruined, and he could not return to the unhappy conditions he had experienced.

Though Martha loved her son and would have given all she had to help him, she knew that his unreasoning demands on her attention and time would be more than she could bear. Her health suffered, and as time went on the problem of his future, when they would no longer be there to care for him, became a serious matter. He could not be left to complicate the lives of relatives. Martha knew that for such as he there was no place in a world built for normal human beings. That is the great tragedy of these children. The sorrow that such a child can bring, only those who have

experienced this can know. Unescapable sorrow! Yes, but Martha had yet to learn that sorrow, through that wonderful power that God has given to man, can be transmuted into a blessing that others may share. She little knew that even then she was being prepared for a task that only she could do. Her sorrow, her need, and her love for her son made her a suitable instrument for a Divine purpose.

In her desperate need, Martha turned to prayer. "Man's extremity is God's opportunity," and her prayer was answered, but not in the way she expected. One night as in a dream she heard a voice saying, "take up your cross, and I will show you the way. Do not expect others to do for you what you can do for yourself." At first Martha was not sure that this message was real, thinking it was but the fantasy of an over-wrought mind, but a few nights later, the message came again even more clearly. She was convinced that she had received a direct spiritual message; a strange peace enveloped her for a time, and she felt that her burden had been lifted from her. But there was to be no easy way out. Martha knew that she had been given a task, but what it was she did not then know. Guidance came slowly, for God shows us only one step at a time, and it was many months before the way opened. In the meantime she nursed her son back to health, and kept her mind open to any idea that might come.

Then an illustrated magazine came into her hands, in which was a description of a Rudolf Steiner school in Scotland, where the teachers or co-workers dedicated their lives to the care of mentally handicapped children for the love of the work, and with no remuneration for themselves beyond their normal every day needs. The teachers themselves were students of the philosophy of the late Dr. Rudolf Steiner, a man of whom Martha had never heard. It seemed incredible, but Martha decided to write to the Superintendent. The school was just what she had always sought for, but it was so far away. She explained her needs, and asked if it was not possible to send out teachers to South Africa to start a similar school. The kindly Superintendent, Dr. Karl Konig, was sympathetic, but at that time had nobody ready or willing to undertake the work, and advised Martha to write again in six months time, which she did. This time a more favourable reply was received, a young man would be ready in nine months time to come to South Africa and start a school. In the meantime she was to interest parents, raise funds, and find a suitable property to start the home. Martha was overjoyed at the news, but little knew what was before her. If she had known, her courage might have failed her.

Martha started on her quest. She called on editors, doctors, and Cabinet Ministers, Government and Provincial Departments, Mental Health authorities. She was possessed of an idea, and ideas have legs, and these legs led her into many strange places. Martha was politely received, but could raise very little interest, and certainly no financial backing for her scheme. A woman with a mission is a tiresome person, "just another person with a bee in her bonnet, and there were so many buzzing around!" How often would she have given up her quest but for the force that urged her on. Rudolf Steiner had said that "Every idea that becomes your ideal creates within you life forces." Martha's faith in her mission was strong, and soon the tiny seed of faith began to grow.

The time was drawing near when the teacher would arrive, and Martha was almost in despair at finding the farm she needed, when the ideal property came to her notice, and which was conveniently situated within easy distance of her home. When she saw the farm "Dawn", she knew she need seek no further, even the name was symbolic of the future. The grounds were sadly neglected, but there was a wonderful view, lovely old trees, and an atmosphere of peace. The old farmhouse had a roof that leaked, a dark kitchen with an old coal stove, and, of course, no electric light. But Martha saw only the future, when bright dormitories, an airy kitchen and electric light would materialise.

But how to buy it? There was as yet no money, many parents had written showing interest, but few were able or willing to risk investing their money in a scheme where a woman's faith was the only security. The price was high for farming land, and Martha's husband, being of a practical mind, used his slide rule and worked out the price per morgen! But she was a visionary, she saw it only as a setting for her scheme, and was not concerned with how much wheat per morgen it would produce, or how many cattle it would graze.

Up to this time Martha had fought a lone battle, but now it was necessary to form a committee to consider the possibilities of establishing a home for backward children on the farm, and a group of friends agreed to serve on the Council of Management. With this support, the Hermanus Rotary Club was asked to sponsor the scheme, which it readily agreed to do, and later, at the national Rotary Conference which was held at Hermanus in 1951, the project was given national support. With this substantial backing, Martha's idea had become a reality.

Somehow, sufficient money was raised to pay the first instalment on the farm, and after many months of protracted negotiations the farm was bought. By this time the teacher had arrived in South Africa and was eager to start his work, but the house had to be furnished and a housekeeper found.

Friends, knowing of Martha's struggle to start the school, were sympathetic, and gifts of money and furniture arrived, and the home was furnished with the barest necessities, with accommodation for only two or three pupils. There was still no housekeeper, no replies had been received to advertisements, work with retarded children made no appeal, especially in such primitive conditions. Martha again had to trust and wait, and soon learnt how faith, when left to God's guidance, could work what seemed like miracles. But miracles need no suspension of natural laws to come about, the Great Spirit used ordinary human beings to do His will.

Then one morning an old lady called at her home. "Have you a housekeeper for your home yet?" she asked, "No," replied Martha. "Well," said the old lady, "I have come to offer you my services free for six months." Martha looked at the rather frail woman, wondering if she would be capable of doing this difficult work, and hardly believing this offer could be real. Mrs. B., seeing her hesitation remarked "I know I am old, but there is plenty of work in me yet, and I mean what I say, and I am trained in domestic science." It was incredible, Martha gasped at this unexpected solution to their problem, and gratefully accepted the offer. The old lady proved a blessing indeed. She set to with a will, raided the homes of her friends and collected all manner of utensils for the kitchen, and started the home with the teacher and two pupils.

The first winter was a hard one, and the rippling river became a roaring torrent, and many times this small family were marooned for days at a time. The roof leaked, and water seeped through the walls, there were only oil lamps and very little comfort, but the gallant old lady stayed out her six months, and when she was ready to leave, another skilled teacher from Europe arrived to take her place.

A day came when the water supply to the home gave out, and the small family had to be evacuated for a few days, while this was temporarily rectified. It soon became increasingly necessary to find an assured water supply, and though funds were low, this had to be done. A borehole was sunk, a pump installed, and many necessary repairs, as well as additional buildings, had to be considered. The fees of the few pupils were not sufficient to meet every day expenses. Parents made great efforts to raise money, and fund raising committees in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg were formed, but even these efforts were not enough.

After the second winter, the fording of the Onrust River became a serious problem, but to build a bridge was quite beyond the resources of the school, and how this problem was solved was another miracle. If faith the size of a mustard seed could remove mountains, it could also build bridges, and Martha found that faith was as effective as Aladdin's lamp in making things materialise; she had but to keep her faith shining bright, and believe in the Power that was working through her, and what was needed would come their way. Even if it was an appointment with a Cabinet Minister, or other important person that was needed, and there seemed no way of contact, a combination of circumstances would bring this about quite unexpectedly, and so it was with the bridge. It so happened that the Municipality, who owned a plantation adjoining "Dawn", was faced with the same difficulty of approach to their farm. The river had to be crossed at a drift lower down, and this also was often impassable in winter. Knowing of the School's need and their lack of funds, the Town Council very kindly approached the Divisional Road Board for assistance; this was favourably received, and with their combined efforts a concrete causeway was built over the drift, and an old road to the farm was repaired, making a very pleasant approach to the home, which has proved a great blessing.

Nothing seemed too great or too small for this miracle working Power to produce — a washing machine, a carpet sweeper, a weaving loom, a spinning wheel, carpenter's bench and tools, carpets and curtains, and a number of gifts came; the kindness of people was incredible.

In spite of the many gifts, all the improvements etc. had caused the overdraft at the bank to reach alarming proportions. The School Council was faced with the problem of reducing this by the end of the year, and several thousands were needed, but where it was to come from no one knew. Every means were tried to raise this money, with no success. Eventually a guarantor was found to back the loan until such time as the money would materialise. There were only a few months to go, and still no sign of how this would happen. Martha's faith was tested to the utmost, various small amounts came, but these were soon swallowed up.

Then one day, Martha received a letter from a relative, telling of a certain lottery, that had assisted a similar school in Britain, and suggesting that she approached them. In their desperate need, she was prepared to explore every avenue, and decided to write to the Directors of the distant lottery, explaining their need, hardly daring to hope that such an unknown project as hers would receive consideration. To her great surprise and joy, she received a favourable reply, saying that half the charitable proceeds of the January lottery would be allocated to them, just the very time it would be needed! But just how much it would be, Martha could not tell. When the cheque arrived, it was for £2,651, more than sufficient to meet the loan. Again the impossible had happened, their needs had been met, "pressed down and running over!"

When a year later another donation of a similar amount arrived from the same source, could Martha doubt that there was a Power working through her? To-day the farmhouse has expanded to accommodate sixteen boys, but it still retains its homely atmosphere, and the airy kitchen and bright dormitories, of Martha's dreams, have become a reality. There the boys of all ages find happiness in the care of understanding teachers, whose lives they share, as in a family.

There are now four co-workers who have come from Europe to staff the school; of them much could be said, but they do not seek praise for themselves, for their self-sacrificing work. They are students of the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, and seek to gain even greater understanding of the work to which they have dedicated their lives. On this farm the children live in a world of their own, where they talk each other's language, protected by a merciful Providence from a knowledge of their own imperfections — a blessing denied to many normal human beings. Who can say that these children, playing so happily in this peaceful and unrestricted environment, and relieved of the necessity of earning their own living, have not yet made their contribution to life, in that by their very helplessness they have succeeded in drawing love and service from those privileged to give? For after all, what deeper and more lasting joy does life give than this, that we should serve one another? Of them it can be said, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

Although sorrow for her son still lingers in Martha's heart, she has learnt the meaning of her son's life, and finds comfort in the words of St. Paul, "Our light affliction, which is but for the moment, worketh for us a more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." She believes that when his gentle spirit is released from his frail body, he will have earned for himself "his weight of glory," and she knows that, because of his affliction, he will leave behind the achievement of a home that will be a sanctuary for many like him, who have to tread this life on earth, handicapped, for some inscrutable purpose of an All Wise Providence.

Though this story concerns only Martha's small efforts in this great venture of faith, tribute must be paid to the individual effort of the other parents, who have contributed so much to the establishing of this greatly needed Rudolf Steiner School, which will also provide a home where these children who never grow up, can end their days in peace and security. The co-operation of all parents, and the goodwill shown by many friends has been a heart-warming experience to Martha, who believes that this home, which has been built on the rock of faith and selfless service, will withstand the winds and the storms that inevitably arise in most human endeavours.

## **A VENTURE OF FAITH. TEN YEARS LATER.**

It is now ten years since this story was published in the Magazine 'Milady', which is now out of publication, under the title 'Miracle at Hermanus'. How that story came to be written is a miracle in itself, as Martha had never written a story before nor, has she written another since. It was her only contribution to literature, and was written under inspiration. But to tell how it came about is a story in itself, which may some day be told. Suffice it to say, by many strange ways it found its way to many distant parts of the world, it brought comfort to many parents, and influenced people to send donations to the school at Hermanus. Owing to the demand for it the story was printed as a small booklet, and several hundred copies were again distributed.

The progress that has taken place in the past decade continues to be a 'Miracle', and a demonstration of faith, which of course has been accompanied by 'Works'. For as the Bible tells us 'Faith without works is dead,' and Martha and her friends have shown their faith by their works.

The growth of the School at 'Dawn Farm' alone, has far exceeded Martha's dreams. There are now almost seventy pupils and young adults, with staff make up to about one hundred persons on the property. It has become a training centre for teachers in curative education for handicapped children. Two new Schools of the Camphill Movement have been established, one at Johannesburg, and another at Port Elizabeth, while a third is being planned, for Natal, as soon as sufficient funds have been raised. These Schools are linked with the Camphill Movement in Great Britain, which provides many of the co-workers, who have made South Africa their home, and give to our children dedicated and experienced care.

Martha now well on in years has lived to see her dreams come true, and has watched the school withstand the storms and stresses that are inseparable from such a project. Her son Robert, who has given his name to one of the Houses, still carries his frail body with courage and cheerfulness, performing many useful domestic chores in the third home at Dawn Farm - Cloister House, the home for the young men, who have grown up on the farm, where they receive training in many useful crafts and farm work. Robert, though unaware of the achievement his destiny has brought into being, takes pride in that he is able to make his small contribution to the life of this sheltered community.

Martha has learnt to bless her son, who, through the sacrifice he has made of his normal faculties in the sphere of existence, has achieved a monument, that has become a blessing to many others, handicapped as he is, an achievement that many normal young men would be proud to have accomplished.

The tale is not yet fully told, and when the much needed village for young handicapped persons comes into being, yet a further chapter will be added to this 'Venture of Faith.'

Martha is happy to know that other parents are coming forward to complete the task begun by Robert and his parents, nearly fifteen years ago.

Sorrow can be likened to a cloud with a silver lining, which according to that old song can be turned inside out to show the silver lining, which can bring a blessing for mankind.

It is sorrow rather than joy, that is the stimulus to service for others.