

1973 - Why Plamil?

by Leslie Cross (1914-1979)

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Advertising and image-building being what they are, it is unsurprising that dairy milk is thought by most people to be a gentle and necessary food for human consumption.

However, as an objective observation, its production is far from gentle and its necessity for human beings far from absolute.

I was brought up in the aura of a generally accepted background belief that in a special but undefined way cows just make milk, for us, and that if we don't milk them regularly they will suffer. I had reached my early thirties before this belief was punctured.

The myth was exploded by the sharp shock of a single discovery: that in order to make viable quantities of milk available for human consumption it is necessary to take the calf away from the cow, so that we and not it can have its mother's milk. If we left it with its mother there would be no need for us to do any milking; the calf would do it, just as other mammals do.

This discovery stunned me: I could not believe that human beings — the noble species — could **as a matter of routine** so ignobly violate the tender mystery, the productive instinct, the sanctity, of motherhood. After all, motherhood is motherhood — human or animal. And do not farmers use as an argument against killer dogs that it is pitiful to hear a sheep calling for its killed lamb? Why deliberately, then, rob a cow of its calf? Why this double standard? It was necessary to be certain of facts, and I took trouble to verify.

Milk (and in this context what is meant is dairy milk) is projected to the public not merely as a desirable item of human food but also as being in some mystical manner almost sacred — absolutely essential for human existence on any acceptable level. The techniques of the persuaders emit overtones designed to make us regard as slightly mad anyone considering going without this white liquid.

The unadvertised facts of dairy farming are briefly as follows. Mammals (including the human) make milk for the sole purpose of feeding their young up to the age of weaning, and the milks differ in composition to suit the species. To make milk, the cow must first be made pregnant, by the bull direct or by artificial insemination; but either way at a time to suit human market requirements in respect of the date on which the cow will calve and therefore start to produce milk. Her calf is taken away from her either at birth or more usually a few days later. She bellows her anguish for her stolen calf, sometimes for several days and nights. Her calf is denied its birthright, the care and comfort of its mother's presence.

Calves not wanted for rearing into beef, or as dairy herd replacements, are killed for veal. The trend is away from the large number killed very young and in favour of imprisoning them in pens in factory farms. Unable even to turn around ("in order to keel the head at one end and the dung at the other" as one factory farmer has put it), they remain in their crude tight prisons until the eventual journey to the slaughterhouse.

By various devices (eg, milking her dry twice a day so that her body responds to an apparent need for more milk), the lactation period of the cow is unnaturally extended to several months. When the lactation ends, the process is repeated: pregnancy, calving, loss of calf, followed by the milk-inducing techniques. Eventually, worn out from one pregnancy after another, she is killed for beef.

The basics of dairy farming were never more succinctly stated than in a television serial during which a countrywoman thus explained them to a townswoman: "Put the bull to the cow, and when the calf comes kill it, so that we can have the milk." Equally telling were the words of a writer in the "Daily Express" in 1961 when as part of an argument in favour of the factory farm he wrote: "How many people who object to this (broiler) method know that last year 800,000 calves were slaughtered within a few days of birth, largely so that we could have their mothers' milk?" Since 1961 the number of calves killed so young has decreased; instead, the veal unit in the factory farm is taking over.

The dairy farm in the fountainhead of the beef industry, supplying the calves which are that industry's raw material. More milk, more calves. More calves, more milk. Meat and milk production is one thing, not two; and farmers call it the "meat-milk complex". Dairy products per se might well be listed as 1. calves; 2. worn-out cows; 3. milk and derivatives.

But whatever one's personal feelings, milk is now woven into the fabric of living. The cup of tea, the cooking... doing without milk raises not only questions of diet, but social problems as well. Something is needed to help those willing to face the need for change.

In the autumn of 1955, when staying at the former home of H.G. Wells in Folkestone, I surrendered to a long-suppressed inward calling to do something about a replacement for milk. I contacted a few people I thought might be sympathetic, and in June 1956 in London these few of us founded the Plantmilk Society, which became a registered charity. We conducted practical research into the possibilities of making "milk" in a "mechanical cow" and in 1961 we founded a limited company which we called Plantmilk Ltd. In 1965 this company, then situated at Langley, Bucks, produced the first saleable cans of a liquid which looked like milk, could be used like milk and had milk-like qualities. It was sold as "Plantmilk", but later for legal reasons the brand name was changed to Plamil. However, in conversation and for general purposes it is still referred to as plantmilk. It is the result of many years of sustained effort and not a little personal sacrifice by a very small group of people.

Plamil is on sale in two sizes of can in most Health Stores, some chemists, and a few general shops. It contains no ingredients of animal origin. It is canned with twice the percentage of protein and fat as ordinary milk, and may therefore if desired be diluted with water. The protein contains 21 amino acids and is a **complete protein**, extracted from the soya bean. Among the vitamins in Plamil is Vitamin B12. There is no artificial flavouring, colouring, preservative or other additive. Since it was first introduced it has been improved on a number of occasions, and the latest version is more acceptable to the palate than previous ones.

The plantmilk factory at Langley was closed in 1972 when the company was given notice to quit, the site having been sold for residential development. The company now has its factory in the very town (Folkestone) where the idea first crystallized. To add to the symbolism, the plantmilk factory was originally built as a dairy. I like to think that the spirit of H.G. Wells — who wrote "The Shape of Things to Come" — approved of this turn of events in the resort where he once lived.

Over the years, many users have proved that Plamil is a suitable replacement for dairy milk. Leaflets and hints on its uses are available. For infant feeding, a special leaflet can be obtained from the Secretary, Plantmilk Ltd., Plamil House, Bowles Well Gardens, Dover Road, Folkestone, Kent. A number of babies have been successfully reared with the use of Plamil, but as with any substitute (and anything other than its mother's breast milk is a substitute food where a baby is concerned) medical advice should be obtained if any difficulty is encountered.

Plamil has been exported to various countries, including New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Holland, and Bermuda. In addition to plantmilk, the company also makes a non-animal replacement for dairy cream: this is sold in cans under the brand name of Plamil Delice. There is also a chocolate bar — Plamil Chocolate. Other non-animal foods are being planned, with the aim of making life easier and better for those who do not like the idea of their food being dependent upon animal exploitation.

The aim of the Plantmilk Society (a humane and universally acceptable replacement for dairy milk for human consumption) would be a step along the road away from animal exploitation. Our habit of making slaves of animals, and therefore slave-owners of ourselves, not only hurts animals but is far from good for us. I hope that Plamil will live up to what we first called it — "the milk of human kindness" — and thus help toward a better quality of living.