

BABIES AND BLOSSOMS

THESE were roses and lupins and smooth green lawns in front, and in the background were hills and thick pines, and the beauty of the gardens was reflected in the house, in the shining floors, the polished furniture, and in the happy, efficient atmosphere of the place. This may sound rather like an extract from a tourist's guide book, but really it was my first impression of the Residential Nursery.

"Residential Nursery, please don't call it nurseries," the secretary asked me. "People immediately think of seedlings, 1/6 a dozen."

The most striking things in the sitting-room were an enormous grey plush dog with white button eyes, and large bowls of the roses and lupins I had noticed outside. It could easily have been the sitting-room of a well-kept private home, but for the group of little faces I had seen pressed against a front window. That, of course, was the idea—a home away from home. In the sitting-room I was told something about the nursery, after the matron, the sister and the secretary had introduced themselves.

They told me that the Residential Nursery had been founded as long ago as 1920, and that its object was to give a home to young children if their mothers became ill or were having another baby. During the last war, so many mothers were in a desperate plight with their husbands away, that something had to be done. It was. The Women's National Reserve conceived and created the Residential Nursery. Most of the money for upkeep is raised by functions.

A Bump and a Bellow

"We take girls up to five and boys up to three," they told me, "but mostly the ages range between one and three. Boys are too rough for the younger children when they are over three; that's why we can't take them. The nursery is not like an orphanage, because the population keeps changing, and it's not like a day-nursery, because the children live here continuously for a period. It's a combination of the two in a way."

Just then there was a bump. Then there was bellow. The matron left the room and after a while the bellowing stopped.

"Just the rocking-horse," she said, coming back smiling.

Life is evidently not all roses for those in charge of the nursery. Even here there are problems of rehabilitation. Much time is spent getting the children used to their new surroundings. And they are no sooner at home there than it is usually time for them to go back to their real homes and become acclimatised all over again. Not quite a

vicious circle—but a difficult one. The nursery assistants have to ooze tact and understanding.

Through a door, I could see some little chairs; through a window the corner of a playing ground. From somewhere in the front of the house were coming friendly little noises. The place was hinting at children all the time, so when they said "Perhaps you'd like to see the children now?" I wasn't slow in saying yes.

Pulling Things to Bits

The noises were coming from a sunny room in the front, where about 10



"Twins who would eat only meat"

tiny children were playing in the charge of an assistant. There was the rocking-horse that had bumped, and a doll's house with half the roof off. It was amazing, so I was told, how the children pulled things to bits. They even managed to unscrew the bolts from the chairs.

"I can't see how children of that age can possibly be wondering how things are made, as the psychologists would have us believe they are," the secretary mused. "They pull things to pieces just because they love fiddling, I'm sure."

One little boy, nearly three, had taken complete possession of a little girl just 12 months. "My baby," he murmured to us. He had been born on board ship. His parents were missionaries in Japan, and had had to leave that country quickly. His mother had been in ill-health ever since. Patsy, the little girl, had been in the nursery for three months.

"We've had Syrian children here, and Greek, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Austrian, Yugoslavian, Canadian and Australians, as well as New Zealanders," the matron added.

Solemn little faces were peering up at us, and our responsibility seemed very great.

The Meat-Eating Twins

Back across the passage was the roomy kitchen, spotlessly clean and shining.

"It's not the amount of food we have to cook," they told me, "but the variety. We have most fun over meal times. The children have all got their likes and dislikes. Some of them are really faddy. There were twins here once who would eat only meat. Every meal time they screamed for meat—and how they screamed! This was too much for us, so we sat with them all one afternoon till they finally ate up the rest of their dinner. Strangely enough, after that, they ate everything we gave them. Most children go away from here loving their crusts."

It was certainly a place where children seemed to bloom. As we went down the path they picked me a rosebud in honour of the babies. —V.C.



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