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Country Life

STATION HELPS

THE other evening I pried my husband out of his paper, and asked him if Thurber tried to be funny, or if he just wrote down the things as they happened. I got a doubtful sort of look and the answer that he knew he was being funny all right. So I tried to explain that I seemed to understand his books so well because the same sort of things were always happening to us. I got a very queer look indeed for that, so I shut down. But when I read over "A Sequence of Servants," I began remembering and remembering till I felt it was time I had a turn too.

Not that we really had servants. I always wished we did. Other people did, in those days. Other people's wore black dresses and whispered at meals. Ours gave loud yells when they wanted us. Once a friend and I were strolling past the kitchen door when there was a shriek and a breadboard came out spinning very fast on its side. It just missed Alice's nose. What especially pleased us was that Alice seemed so genuinely surprised. We had our dear Missie who stayed always, and nurses who left occasionally to be married. We accepted these as a sort of natural order, beyond particular amusement. Of course there was once Red-Linen-Jacket-Nursie, who stayed only a week and cried most of the time, and who always smacked the wrong one, but she was an exception. What we had for dramatic interest were a series of Married Couples, and the Men on the Station. The couple Mother said she liked the best were the ones who took her horse and gig and rug into the little town. They got muddled and went home the wrong way, arriving next day with the horse tottering and the rug gone. In the end they fought each other with carving knives and had to be taken to hospital. Missie said they must be given notice, but Mother was always sorry because they had such pleasant smiles.

Perhaps I had better say again that all this is quite true as I remember it. And if anyone should read it, they mustn't mind, children being odd and inaccurate in their viewpoints. I was a nervous cowardly little girl, and sadly aware of it. I was terrified of the dark, and knew I'd die if I saw a ghost, and used to lie awake praying to God not to call me to be a missionary. But when someone at school whispered about Drunk Men, I was able to burst out cheerfully, "Oh, you needn't be afraid of Them, we see Them every day at home." Which was of course exaggeration and boasting, and earned its judgment, for the other little girls drew back and talked among themselves, and I learned that it was not the thing to have

drunk men at home. But we all knew, ourselves, because Mother said they were "only drunk, dear." When the share cook ate yeast and climbed inside the bread oven to ring for the doctor, and then came bursting into the drawing-room where we had visitors, roaring "I'm poisoned, I'm POISONED," Mother just stood up and said "Go away at once," and he did. He was coal black from the oven and only had his trousers on and we enjoyed it very much. When he had gone Mother asked the doctor to come, and he was taken away.

We had almost more fun when Mother wasn't there for the scenes, because she never was excited like the others, except once when the new groom brought round her horse with the saddle on

back to front. It did look funny. Afterwards Mother said sadly that she was afraid he wouldn't do. Once when she

had the children and the cook in the governess cart the horse bolted and the reins broke, the cook grew quite excited and threw one of my smaller sisters out on the grass at the side. In the end Mother got the horse stopped, and fixed the reins and went back, but the sister always felt it as rather a slur, and Mother said the silly woman had lost her head. We thought this meant much the same as when Flo dyed her hair to make it more yellow. Only it went bright green, like spring grass. It looked so pretty waving on top while she stirred the cakes.

We thought Mother was rather hard on Mrs. Pegler too, Mrs. Pegler brought no husband, only Little Warren, so she had Paddy from the cookshop to help her with the wood and vegetables. Little Warren only knew how to make bows and arrows and how to clean knives; we soon grew tired of him, but Paddy gave us a lovely treat. One day he grew cross because there were too many boots and shoes to clean. He danced and yelled and threw them right along the concrete yard to where they bounced off the chopping block. We rushed to see the glorious stream, boys' and girls', babies' and grown-ups', the straps and laces flew in the wind, and they banged like anything on the block. We were always pleased to see Paddy after that, though he went back to the cookshop. Mrs. Pegler left because Mother went into the larder with her one day. I slid in behind, hoping to get my hand on something. All round the shelves, in front of the tins, were saucers and plates covered with little bits of food. Mother was surprised at this, and asked what they were for? Mrs. Pegler burst out really crying, and said she couldn't bear to think of all those poor starving Russians. So she and Little Warren went away, and we really liked Mrs. Matthew much better because she gave us slices of suet pudding any time. When she left she

Written for "The Listener"
by FRANCES BLUNT