

SKIRT DIPLOMACY

Our Butcher Boys and Mother

In a Complex Game

Of Stale Meat

Special to the "Record"

by

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"I am not in favour of petticoat diplomacy myself."—Dr. Hugh Dalton, M.P., in a recent interview in New Zealand.

SUCH a remark from a man of Dr. Dalton's reputation for sound thought, could very easily be taken as an insult by an ardent feminist like myself, and Dr. Dalton might find himself abruptly laid low by an umbrella handle.

But I am taking up no umbrellas. For it has occurred to me that Dr. Dalton in youth may have been embittered as I was from some such feats of petticoat diplomacy as took place regularly in our household when mother changed her tradesmen. It was her theory that if you gave your custom to one man for years, it simply encouraged him to work off all his musty or decayed stock upon you. Periodic complaints and withdrawal of custom kept the shops up to scratch, said mother.

Maybe her idea would have proved itself, too, if only she had not made the mistake of marrying my father. But she took the role of doctor's wife seriously, and always preferred to buy her household goods from a tradesman who was also doing the decent thing by patronising father's surgery. This dual motive—of constant change to ensure good service and of dogged loyalty to hold patients—drove my mother willy-nilly into diplomacy.

I SHALL never forget the first time we changed our butcher. Later on, as our custom moved steadily round and round the neighbourhood, I became hardened to the diplomatic obligations which the changes involved. But at the time of the first change I was only seven years old and not prepared.

"Dixon's meat has not been good lately," said my mother ominously one lunch-time, sitting at her chop.

"They say Pringle sells excellent meat," said my mother thoughtfully.

A week later, she declared that she had gone to the safe for a pound of Dixon's prime, and a regiment of portly maggots had flashed red eyes at her, then



A regiment of portly maggots humped the meat on their shoulders and bore it off triumphantly.

humped the meat on their shoulders and borne it off triumphantly in front of her startled gaze.

"I think I'll try Pringle," she decided. "Dixon's getting very slack."

"Hum," said father, which, as he intended, meant nothing at all.

"But Dixon is one of your patients, isn't he?" pursued mother.

"When he's ill."

"Then I don't think I ought to tell him straightout I don't like his meat. We'll have to wean him off gradually, and perhaps he'll improve," suggested mother brightly.

IN the end, she divided her orders so that Dixon should still supply us with sausages and cats' meat, for his sausages were very juicy, and Pringle should bring the remainder of our rations.

Lest Dixon should get suspicious about the smaller orders, my mother put up an elaborate camouflage to hoodwink him.

First of all, she paid her bill, at the same time casually mentioning that her husband had become a vegetarian in order to experiment on the effect of meatless diet upon the system.

She also said, "Mr. Dixon, how nice your shop is looking. So clean and fresh with this new sawdust," and smiled with ingenuous charm.

She ended by asking him whether he would mind calling at 11 o'clock in future instead of 10, because the girl could then pay him cash. "She's upstairs making the beds about 10, and might not hear the bell," explained mother, reflecting how cleverly she had cleared the path for the arrival of Pringle's boy at 9.45.

When she got home, she gathered all us children and the cook, May, together into the breakfast room and said sternly. "Now, none of you must ever tell Dixon's boy that I'm getting some of my meat from Pringle. And if he asks you, you're to say we're not eating much meat lately."

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Up came Pringle's boy, whistling and tossing the roast.