

The life of a Servant Girl

by Molly Byrne

Molly Byrne was a servant-girl, just one of the thousands of young Irishwomen who, in the early decades of this century, had to hire out with local farmers - farmers whose prosperity derived from the rich dairyland of the Golden Vale, that fertile stretch of Munster which extends from Tipperary, through east Limerick and into North Cork. "Working for the farmers" was an experience that provoked in many servants feelings of bitterness at their servile lot and of lasting resentment towards their employers. Molly Byrne's memories of her days "in service" are still exceptionally vivid. Here, in a verbatim extract, she recalls her experiences of fifty years ago.



ell, (as a servant-girl) you had to be up at six o'clock; you had to light a hearth fire; get a three-legged pot; boil the water; put linseed meal in; (fasting, no tea!); stir it in and leave it boiling slowly over this fire; get out fasting and milk about from eight to ten cows; come in and eat your breakfast, with cups placed on the table and saucers, common cups and saucers and a cake of bread just thrown flattened there and maybe not enough of butter. And one of the men with a big moustache, he might put the jug of milk up to his mouth - (well he wouldn't do it now cause 'twould sicken me!) Anyway, when all that was over: "Come along Molly!" Feed the hens and the chickens. The calves first; hens and chickens; leave out the clocking hens; leave out the geese off of their eggs and they hatching 'em (and they'd come back again) ... You hadn't time to wash your face! (but we'd grand skin, you know!); feed the pigs; wash the buckets; when all that was done - wash the ware after all the breakfast; scrub down a great big table as white as snow with sand and a scrubbing brush; start a great big washing - first the woollens, then a big white washing - no more washing for the week - a great big tub of washing with a washing board.

The farmers looked down on us. We'd a great oul'd dirty big black table, if 'twasn't scrubbed by the servant-girl;



A Co. Limerick farmer and his family, c. 1910.

no bread plate, bread and butter and tea for your breakfast, home made brown bread; no egg, no rasher.

You had no more until your dinner. There was half a pig's head put down - you got turnips or cabbage ready - either of the two, put 'em in. You washed a great big pot o' potatoes, a three-legged pot again for all the working men ...

They'd put a big frying pan up on the side of the range an' they put a piece of dripping into it or a piece of suet, put

chops up for themselves - that was for them! that was for them, and the men got the pig's head!

The servant-girls hatched the chickens, fed the clockers, reared the chickens, fed 'em and when the chickens were fit to kill they killed 'em, plucked 'em, washed 'em and got 'em ready for them to roast and when they were roasted you'd get the **wing!**

An' they might put rice up to cook and you'd be so hungry after a hard morning's work you'd get a cup if they

went to wash themselves or dress themselves ... a cup, and pick a bit of the rice up ... I can see myself at it ... and 'twouldn't be boiled at all! And there was an oul' hole that way (indicating) in the wall near th'oul' hearth fire an' I used to stick the cup in there if I heard 'em coming.

We were glad to have bread and tea. And we weren't looking for any vitamin A's or B's. By god we were (glad)!

Nell Supple used go to the creamery for poor Dinny Callaghan. Anyway, she'd be standing up and I'd be coming with a few messages. I remember that stayed in my mind. She used be bringing home butter and she'd take the paper off o' the butter and she'd ate enough! An' she was clever enough, she'd roll up the paper on it an' she'd beat it again' the churn to place it back again! 'Twas shaped back to the pound!

There were no toilets or anything. An' a rat fell into a big boiler o' milk one day - creamery milk, and I put in my hand an' I took him out and this woman says to me, "You'd make a great nurse". I was only a young girl. The rat got drowned; oh don't talk to me! He was drowned!

The rats were coming up through the boards of the small oul' room downstairs where I slept. And there was a little dog there, I forget her little name, an' I used to take her into the bed to protect me from the rats. Up through the boards of the floor!

And there was a man working there - poor Jim McAuliffe, the Lord have mercy on him, an' he might go for a pint or two into Ballyclough an' one night I woke up. I heard the noise. My oul' window was small an' I used to leave it down. An' he'd one leg over the window an' he coming in to go up to his bed. The door was locked on him! That's all the harm that was in him!

He was sleeping in a loft. He used to go up a ladder. I used to have to go up there and take down their clothes and wash 'em. But you dare not put the poor man's clothes near their (the farmers') clothes! God!

We'd try to make a drop of tea in the morning because they wouldn't be up and we'd drink that sup o' tea.

On Sunday morning then we'd try to boil an egg for ourselves! Nothing on a week morning! You'd get no egg until Easter. Not at all. Only at Easter. We'd put the eggs (on Sunday morning) into the pot o' tea! - let 'em stew away there! They wouldn't boil but they'd cook some way! And we used give John Callaghan an egg, the Lord have mercy on him. And you know the coat with the loose pockets, he used put the egg into it when he'd hear her coming down to get hot water, Sunday morning. An' he talking mad to himself! What was the generation before us like? They used to get up in the morning and boil spuds for the breakfast!



Servant girls drawing the milk to the Meadow Vale Creamery, at Baker's Lane, Charleville, c. 1900.

I remember well they used to go back to Kanturk and hire the Kerry girls and they were big rough women compared to the likes of us, God help us! The Kerry women - they'd be there lined up in the Kanturk street at a fair in the springtime. They used come from around Kerry an' pick up work. The farmers used to settle up with 'em for the year. Black shawls on 'em, long skirts and white blouses. You're a great girl if you got anything from twenty pounds on. Well, begod, you wouldn't get paid at the end of each week. But if there was water or that going through your boots: "Gimme a pound I want to get a pair o' boots". They mightn't have it until the next day. You should ask it!

You started at six and you were lucky if you finished at six. When the man came home from the creamery you had to wash five or six churns, scald 'em; when that was all done, go in and bake a couple of brown cakes; and they thought they were smart where I was working; they couldn't bake a bit o' brown bread - 'twas like that (timber) - they had to get me to do it for 'em. So you washed up after the supper; - from six to six and you were glad to wash your face, get up on the bicycle and get out from 'em ...

They put me dreaming! I must drink my tea. Bad cess to it! Yerra yes! Oul' Dan, the old boss, ate nothing but brown bread and duck eggs for his

breakfast and a big plate of thick porridge. No sweet cakes! No sweets! Nothing beyond that.

He said when he was dying: what was it all for? Life, like. That's what they told me; he said he didn't know what it was all about, what life was all for? You see, when he came to the end ... For nothing, says you!

You laughed. You went to an oul' dance. You went to the races (point-to-point) every spring, but I should bring my poor mother down, the Lord have mercy on her, to 'take up' the day while I'd be at the races. You'd have to get someone in to take your place! I'd tell her the night before that I was going to the races. An' I'd have a new hat! A lovely new hat for seven and six maybe, an' a lovely coat for thirty shillings or two pounds. Cutting a dash! I'd meet all my friends at the races, at Ballyheen or Lisscarroll. This woman said to my mother one time, "Hannah, I never thought you'd such a nice looking girl of a daughter!" For all the notice I took of it!

And the farmers they'd oul' daughters there and they'd big fat legs and fat bottoms!

Things get written in your mind: Where does it put 'em all? I'd prefer not to think about 'em at all!