

LETTER FROM ENGLAND 1

Dear Friends,

Greetings from cold, wet, humid, drafty, chilly, damp but Merrie Old England. What a fantastic country! Home of Shakespeare and Tennyson; Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth; Lister and Fleming; Gainsborough and the Lake painters — it still doesn't believe in central heating and storm windows. Drafts everywhere. Coal fires to be stoked in several rooms. Buckets of ashes to be carried out into a yard and emptied twice daily. An outdoor coal bin with a wet roof that leaks rain into the coal so that the coal has to be shoveled hourly into boxes and brought into the house to dry. A so-called "automatic" Hoover electric washing machine that has to be presided over step-by-step of the way (first heating the water, then the washing, then the rinsing, then the spinning, then the emptying of the water, then the storing — but completely "automatic"). A recent survey indicated that the average British housewife does not trust the machine and therefore insists on being present and supervising every step of the process herself! And then the drying problem; no place to hang the clothes to dry! And should the sun come out on its rare and fleeting visits, the inner debate: shall I or shall I not chance it and hang the laundry outside before it rains again? And invariably the wrong decision!

But so much for the debtors side. There is a happy picture too. Our cottage is truly modern and luxurious by British standards, and beautiful by any standards. An enormous (15' x 30') living room with fireplace (sorry, we promised we wouldn't mention that again) and a huge picture window overlooking a magnificent walled-in garden about 50' x 100', with a stone walk, arbor, hot-house, and huge elms. A cosy dining room with another coal fireplace (this one we call "the monster" — it is like a baby; we haven't stopped feeding it or emptying its ashes for weeks). There is a see-through shelf to an excellent kitchen, which has (will wonders never cease?) a "fridge", complete with 3 shelves and a four-inch-deep freezer, a completely electric oven, grill, and tea-kettle (and in this department, the British are really right up there for speed and efficiency), and a huge pantry with a light that turns on automatically when the door opens. We are equipped with Royal Doulton china (not enough for our family, but beautiful nevertheless) and a fine Hoover vacuum cleaner with attachments. There is constantly so much dust in the place from the coal burners that this appliance gets a twice-daily workout.

Upstairs we have three large bedrooms, the master one with “zip-together divan beds”. This simply means that, yes, the mattresses can be joined together by zipper. (Naturally, sheets for this come in the 107” by 114” size). Marty’s room was equipped with only bed and wardrobe closet, so we piled our 10’ lockers into his room so that he has a long continuous desk and shelf space. The girls’ room has twin beds (they pushed them together for warmth), a vanity, bureau, and an “electric fire” (“heater” to you Americans).

The bathrooms present a bit of a problem. The upstairs one has an ancient but formidable contraption that rarely works. We had a plumber here twice for it. In his inimitable Cockney he explained, “Something like this would be suitable for the Queen of England, ma’am. But not for a family. ’Tis a huge affair, and I’ve been coming to repair it monthly for the last 10 years, but the double trap only has a tiny hole you’d best use this for just emergencies and resort to the downstairs bit o’ goods.” (The downstairs bit o’ goods is our second bathroom, which is off the living room and works well but has no electric outlet for a heater so, as our cockney friend says, “You pays your money and you takes your choice!”)

The town of Maidstone is charming. Located about fifty-six miles from the center of London, it corresponds to Harrisburg and Lancaster, Penna., rolled into one. It’s the capital of Kent County and twice a week the local farmers bring their produce in, set up stalls, and trade. Tuesdays and Fridays are the days to buy your bargains, browse, and watch your pocket-book (in more ways than one; we are told that pick-pockets still abound). The town is hilly, traffic is heavy and zooms along the left side of the road, and parking is a real problem. We live about four to six blocks from down-town Maidstone, and as we trudge home uphill with our bundles, there are two signs to cheer us along. One is “Fight Socialism” (outside the Conservative party headquarters). The other is “Take Courage.” (We thought this most considerate of the British until we found out that “Courage” is a popular British beer!!)

The kids and Josy arrived at London Airport on Sunday, February 4th. Joe transported us, our fifteen suitcases, and a teddy bear to Maidstone by taxi (relatively inexpensive). The sun was out for two whole hours that day to welcome us. On Monday upon enquiring, we were told that we could place Malva immediately into the Girls’ Grammar School (highest level, college preparatory, etc., etc.) but that Lois and Marty would have to be tested. Miss Barnes, headmistress, interviewed Malva, found her most sophisticated, and placed her in fourth form (corresponding to tenth grade). She qualified her offer with the understanding that Malva dress in school uniform (brown skirt, sweater, beanie,

and blazer, striped necktie, beige blouse), and wear no makeup or jewelry to classes. Malva has taken hold beautifully, being very brave and above-board about the makeup. Her only problem is French. (She was in a second-year French class at home, here takes fourth year.) So she and Josy hold French grammar lessons every evening in the living room. She is ahead of the class in mathematics. Science consists of biology, chemistry, and physics, each on different days. She also has “divinity”, English, P.E. (gym), history, geography of Britain, and music. No subject meets more than four times a week, some only one. On her third day of class, in despair she asked the girls, “Doesn’t the sun ever come out here?” Just then somebody replied, “There ’tis, love.”

On Tuesday, February 6th, we took Lois and Marty to West Borough Secondary School for testing (dread of all dreads to the English heart, the eleven plusses for Marty and an upgraded version of the same test for Lois). It took two full mornings to administer, so we had to bring them back again the next day. We were cheerfully told, “Don’t worry love, you’ll know in about a week how they did.” “A week!” we gasped. “Well,” answered the kindly headmaster, Mr. Dimond, “If you like, they can attend school here in the meantime.” We were quick to accept this wonderful offer, and the children remained in this co-educational secondary school for the rest of the week. School hours were from 8:45 a.m. till 4:05 p.m., with an hour and a half for lunch and two recesses, or breaks, as they call them. No uniforms here. Children of the poorer working classes quite openly grouped by ability, the upper two levels only studying French and Algebra, the lower two levels told quite freely, “You’re not quite smart enough for it, dearie.” Lois was placed with the top group of third form (9th grade), Marty with the top group of first form (7th grade). French starts in first form. The French teacher told Lois, who was only in her first year back home, “If you think I’m going to hold a whole class back for you, you’re sadly mistaken!”

Marty reports that the math (or “maths” as they call them here) was easy for him. The teacher gave a problem that he had had about two years earlier back home. The class struggled and struggled. Finally hands began to fly in the air, voices call out, “Please, sir, please, sir, let me!!” When called upon, the students hesitated, then muttered, “Why, the bloody thing won’t work!”

Boys gym (P.E.) was outdoors. Boys dress in shorts, socks, sneakers (called plimsolls) and that’s all! Marty, fortunately, was excused this first time (he had no shorts!). Friday afternoon, results of the eleven plusses came through. Both children had made it with flying colors. On Monday Malva was to bring Lois with her to the Girls’ Grammar School, where Miss Barnes, after similar warnings about

uniform, makeup, and jewelry, would place her in a third form class. Marty was to attend the very respectable Boys' Grammar School on the other side of Maidstone. "What an honor," we were told. "Unheard of," exclaimed some others. "We British pay all these taxes and then you Americans come over and with a toss of the head get your children into grammar schools most of our own youngsters can't qualify for!" And what was the result in our own family? Tears from both Lois and Marty that they would have to leave their friends of three days and, as Marty put it, "Again make a new adjustment."

Maidstone has two cinemas with only one show each a day. The first week we arrived we were deluged by Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton — "Taming of the Shrew" and "The Comedians", each preceded by 15 minutes of commercials and opened by an audience standing to "God Save The Queen." Sittingbourne, where José works, only has one cinema but four bingo parlors. The laboratory, though, is magnificent — one of the best equipped in the world. Lunches are at the laboratory cafeteria, which specializes in 3 to 4 different kinds of potatoes per meal. But there is always cheese to fall back on. (What can you expect for a shilling [12 cents] these days?)

The cottage is 18 miles each way from the laboratory, and both José and Josy have managed to drive on the wrong side of the road and cause a momentary traffic jam with their newly acquired Volvo station wagon, which has only one serious defect: you have a choke to adjust continuously which, if not properly adjusted, causes the car to stall constantly. Petrol costs 68 cents (American money) per gallon.

Shopping is a riot, although there are a few small supermarkets in town. (They give green stamps.) There is a store for game, butcher, greengrocer, fishmonger, dairy, pastry, leather goods, electricity, etc. So shopping takes several hours, especially when you consider that you must park in a multi-story parking lot (the only one in town) several blocks away. The car can hardly fit, although it's a miniature by U.S. standards.

They say this is a mild winter weather-wise, but with a constant average 55° Fahrenheit temperature inside the house, we wouldn't know. People have been very nice to us, and we have been invited for dinner and "high tea" to many houses.

Tune in again about a month from now, when we hope to present the next exciting chapter in the adventures of,

The Traveling Rabinowitz's