

LETTER FROM ENGLAND 2

“Oh to be in England now that April’s there.”
— Browning

It couldn’t have been early April that Robert Browning had in mind, for April here began with snowstorms, with huge flakes that made us scuttle again for our fireplaces and thermal underwear, electric blankets and heaters. It is only now, at the end of April, that we begin to see “some” hope weatherwise; oh yes, it still rains here almost every day or two, but there are now actually hours (and once in a while a whole day here and there) when the temperature climbs to about 56° (outside, that is). Indoors for a few minutes we actually hit an all-time high of 60°.

All this unexpected heat backfired on us a bit — for instance, Josy, carried away with enthusiasm for the garden, arranging of cut flowers in the house, and hanging of laundry outdoors (where the birds got to it on more than one occasion), neglected the coal furnace in the dining room and “the monster” went out completely. It took hours of steady stoking of wood, paper, coal, lighter fluid, and three full boxes of matches, to get the blazing thing blazing again. (With the air wet all the time, nothing catches fire easily.) Among our other troubles have been the day when both the fridge (refrigerator to you Americans) and the so-called fully automatic washing machine both flooded over and then conked out at the same time. (Spare parts come from Chichester and take ten days to get here under a rush order, so we are still waiting.)

However, there is a brighter side to life for aliens in Kent. Orchards in the area are starting to sprout brightly colored blossoms, daffodils and tulips abound everywhere, and we even found that what we thought to be a huge weed outside our living room window was really a rhubarb, and did we have ourselves a pie! They tell us that Kent is the fruit bowl of England, and in summer busloads of tourist come to see peach, cherry, pear, and apple orchards and vineyard hops; strawberry farms also abound with wild pheasants.

We’ve learned by now to cope with quite a bit and feel very European (one makes do here and is proud of it — “You’re all the stronger morally, love”). The telephone system, for example. First of all, phone booths are exactly that — phone booths. Public buildings rarely carry them, and one may literally walk a mile, even through the heart of town, to get one. (This holds true even for some parts of

London.) Then, telephone directories are available publicly, but not in every phone booth, just near the main ones, like in the post office or railroad station (sometimes). Classified directories are just coming in; Maidstone got its first recently (42 pages of such goodies as “chick sexers”, “watercress growers”, “squash clubs”, and “midwives”, although they also have such modernities as “crematoriums” and “contact lenses”).

Using a public phone is really quite simple once you get the hang of it. You have your sixpence ready, but you don't insert it until your party answers. Then a series of beeps erupts, you insert the coin, push button A, wait for the beeps to stop, then push button B. If by that time your party hasn't yet hung up or you haven't been disconnected or the coin slot hasn't decided to get stuck or eject the coin completely, you're in business.

Then there's the area code situation. This depends not on where you're calling, but where you're calling from. If we call our garage (GAR'age, they say here) in Royal Tunbridge Wells from Maidstone, we preface the number by first dialing 97, but if we call the same garage from London, the area code now becomes 228. (And, incidentally, one never dials rapidly, else the whole works just utters a series of beeps and dies out completely.)

We discovered a lovely supermarket (actually there are a few chains, but “Pricerite” seems to carry the greatest assortment and gives S&H pink stamps to boot). Nobody, but nobody, gives shopping bags in which to carry home your collected purchases (you carry your own along at all times, “just in case”). Malva put it quite aptly this way: “There just isn't enough paper left in the whole country after diverting most of it to those itchy-bitsy little stubs of tickets they hand you on the buses and other places, in exchange for your fare or ticket.” There you are, loaded down with three bags of groceries, a pocketbook (“handbag” they call it), two cartons of cake (rubber-banded together because at the bakery you insisted on boxes so the delicate pastry wouldn't crush, and paid fourpence extra for each, despite the unspoken but quite obvious disapproval of the shopgirl who doesn't believe in such luxuries) — there you are, loaded to the gills, wildly swinging around the crowded and madly swaying bus, and the fare-collector takes your fivepence (“it went up one pence last year, ducks, you should know that!”) and insists on handing you a stub of paper to prove you've paid your fare. And when you say, “That's all right, I haven't any place to put it, never mind,” she counters with, “Oh, you'd best take it love — the inspector might pop in on us, and then where would you be?” (We calculate that by now we'd have approximately a bushel of stubs had we saved them all.)

What he lacks in standardization, though, the Britisher more than makes up for in charm, courtesy, and well-bred gentility. We asked the bus driver the other day, “Does this bus go to Teapot Lane?” and got the gentle reply, “With a little bit o’ luck, darling.”

It’s perfectly safe to let your children walk through the town at night or ride the buses or tube in London alone. As a matter of fact, it would be a pity not to, it’s so simple and safe and such a marvelous experience in responsibility, cosmopolitanism, and self-management. It is virtually impossible to get lost on the London tube (here the word “subway” means underground walk or concourse). The London underground is a network of inter-connected lines, all clearly labelled, and at every stop, push-button lighted maps clarify your route. You pay by the distance, and some rides cost as little as fourpence (children travel for half fare).

The names we’ve run across are marvelous: Mr. Tickle (Chief Engineer at the Laboratory), Mrs. Snowball (Lois’ French teacher, who left due to pregnancy), Miss Philpott (Malva’s form mistress, a very serious young woman who, one week after Malva’s admission to her class, announced her intention of leaving at the end of the year to teach in Uganda), Knightrider Street, Snodland, toad-in-the-hole (sausage baked in the center of a mound of Yorkshire pudding — not too bad, really, if well done and once you forget the name), Teapot Lane, the Loose Bus (taking you up Loose Road), Scrubb Lane — we could go on and on.

The main problem with Maidstone, we’ve decided, is that it encompasses the area of a village with the population of a metropolis. And the schools should definitely install a course in sidewalk traffic rules for pedestrians. People park themselves squarely in the dead center of the pavement to stare into store windows, thus blocking foot traffic for everyone else. Everyone walking is carrying or pushing or wheeling something (baskets, carts, shopping bags in the plural, dogs, babies, prams). Nobody keeps to the left, but then nobody keeps to the right either. They just meander. And nobody hurries — the flow of foot traffic moves at a lazy pace, like the trickle of a country stream. Heaven help the one who has an appointment anywhere and has to pass through the center of Maidstone by foot or car to get there.

On Wednesdays the whole town closes at 1 p.m., come what may. All British towns have their early closing days once a week; it varies from place to place. London’s is Saturday, so weekend shopping in London is out of the question. As a matter of fact, a bill is now up in Parliament suggesting that, at least on Sunday

afternoons, sports, cinema, theatre, etc., be permitted to reopen in London after the morning church hours. The prospects of its passing still do not look too hopeful.

One of the delights of living in Europe, though, is that there's so much to see, so interesting, so close, so available. We've been to London twice for weekends and also often just for the day now and then. We visited the usual tourist spots; were especially thrilled by the Tower of London, of course, St. Paul's Cathedral. What a thrill to come unexpectedly upon the graves of Florence Nightingale, of Alexander Fleming, to see the funeral carriage of Wellington (fashioned from the iron of melted-down cannons used at Waterloo), and even, bless the British, on a tiny bust of George Washington discretely tucked away in a corner of the crypt. Had lunch at the famous Cheshire Cheese, favorite of Boswell and Samuel Johnson, and to our delight, were ushered to Johnson's table and Joe placed in the seat with Johnson's plaque. He offered the place to Josy (as the English major) but she gallantly (she thought) refused it and insisted that he have the thrill. Then, when the family rose to leave, after a delightful lunch of mutton, ale, and trifle, lo and behold, the place where Josy had sat turned out to have the marking, "Favorite Seat of Charles Dickens!"

Another time we rode to the top of the Post Office Tower, London's highest spot, and splurged on a luncheon of tournedos, cider, and eclairs in the restaurant, which revolves one cycle every half-hour, offering a magnificent view of the city (British weather being what it is, one side was in almost complete haze while the other sparkled in sunlight). Across from us at the next table sat a distinguished gentleman of about forty, sideburns, immaculately groomed, dining with a pretty and much younger blonde. Joe had been studying him intently for several minutes, and finally questioned the Spanish-speaking waiter. (All waiters in England seem to speak Spanish!) "He speaks Spanish, señor," replied our waiter, "But with a Mexican accent!" Upon hearing this, Joe approached the gentleman, introduced himself in Spanish, and as they conversed, asked him, "Do you by any chance know Edmundo Azcarate, one of my closest friends in Mexico?" "But, of course," came the reply, "We had dinner together two weeks ago before my wife" (gesturing to the blonde) "and I left for here!" It turned out that he and Joe had met in Edmundo's house some twenty-eight years ago.

We visited the British Museum on several occasions and thrilled at such displays as the Rosetta Stone, the Magna Carta, and Elgin Marble statues from the Parthenon. The room of original manuscripts took our breath away with such choice originals (in the author's own handwriting) as Mendelssohn's "Wedding March", Handel's "Water Music", Kipling's "Recessional" (originally titled

“After”), Queen Victoria’s first attempt at age four to print her name in block letters, and a letter written by Keats six months before he died, mentioning words to the effect that “a certain Mr. Shelley had been kind enough to invite him to visit and recuperate at his home in Italy.”

We even allowed the children ten whole minutes in Carnaby Street, like good parents, where they went absolutely wild running from shop to shop. We spend a Sunday morning with friends at Petticoat Lane, struggling through the mobs, being screamed at by the hucksters, and threatened by a placard (carried by an unsavory character) which announced, “End of the World at 3 p.m.!” Visited Hampstead heath with its charming town houses, the Tate Gallery, saw Kew Gardens, a huge estate with lovely parks and a delightful bridge at a distance over the lake. (We were later informed that it was really a painted cardboard poster strategically placed to look like the real thing!) Stopped for an hour at Speaker’s Corner of Hyde Park’s Marble Arch, where we and the children heard impassioned speeches concerning the use of paper as a currency standard, the case for legalizing prostitution, and allowing in immigrants from Asia, all delivered by bearded characters (and one or two women who looked as if they could have used a beard), all on soap-boxes sparring verbally with a well-placed opposition in the audience among the surrounding bystanders. Our friends took us to Bloom’s Kosher Restaurant, where the mob standing in the lobby waiting for tables was so noisy that waiters with trays of sausages were sent out among them to throw out tidbits and thus quell the impending stampede. All great fun.

Sundays we usually take day trips. Once we went south as far as the British Channel to Rye (an old, picturesque, cobble-stoned town with winding streets and many potters’ shops). Saw Hastings and Battle (a town seven miles from Hastings where the Battle of Hastings really occurred). We couldn’t get into all the museums we wanted to visit since many of them close on Sundays (the pervading philosophy is that, after all, museum guides too need their day off from work) but we timed it so that we could see most of what we wanted to.

Another Sunday we devoted completely to Canterbury, with its scenic crumbling stone walls and ruins, its magnificent cathedral (robbed of its silver one week after our visit), and its famous West Gate under which Chaucer and the Canterbury Pilgrims are reputed to have travelled. Marty even found Watling Street, which Alfred the Great had designated as the dividing line between Angles and Jutes. We spent another glorious morning at Dover Castle with the town and its white cliffs below us and the coastline of France barely visible across the English Channel. Walter Castle, retreat of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and its beach with

stones the size of lemons, lies north along the coast. Lois wanted to eat a sandwich at Sandwich, so we stopped briefly in the quaint old town, then continued north to Broadstairs (haunt of Dickens and locale of his “Bleak House”) — an old crone scowled at us from behind the ivy-covered shutters as we stood outside taking pictures. Further north the same day we chanced upon a colorful Viking galley on the beach, erected recently next to a stone monument commemorating the exact location where Hengist and Horsa had arrived in the British Isles. And finally Margate, crowded and touristy as any seaside resort, resembling in atmosphere its New Jersey namesake outside Atlantic City.

With April came spring vacation, one week’s closing of Joe’s laboratory and three weeks’ closing of the children’s schools. On Sunday morning, April 7th, we took the 9:45 a.m. train at Maidstone East Railroad Station and set out for a week in Paris. We changed trains at Ashford for Dover, were transferred to a bus between Sandgate and Folkestone (a derailment on the tracks), back to the train at Folkestone for a fifteen-minute ride to Dover, taxi from Dover Priory to Dover Marine, then the ferry across the Channel (1½ hour boat ride), and then at Calais a 3½ hour train ride to Paris. Eight hours to cover a distance of about two hundred miles!

But Paris is as beautiful as ever, and although we encountered unmistakable signs of anti-American feeling (“A la porte, Humphrey!” and “Laos Escroquerie” — swindle — and “Assassins Americans!” scribbled on walls of the left bank and the metro), we also saw, for the first time, “Vive U.S.A.!” While Cityrama buses touring the city are worth a look (grotesque, lopsided, glass-enclosed two story curiosities with upholstered seats equipped with push-button commentaries on the passing sights in seven languages), they make only one stop (Sacre Coeur Cathedral at Montmartre), so we felt rushed throughout the extensive tour, even though it lasted three and a half hours. But exploring on our own was most satisfactory. Traveling by metro, shopping in the outdoor markets for French loaves, sausages, cheese, and pastry, eating picnic lunches at Versailles one day, at the Louvre gardens the next, on the Bateaux Mouches as they cruised up the Seine on the third, enjoying a light supper picnic-style one warm night in the small park adjoining Cluny, the medieval museum in the Latin Quarter, walking, walking, constantly walking, learning to know Paris as a pedestrian and love the surprises it afforded this way.

Joe and Marty bought themselves men’s berets in the large department store Galleries Lafayette; they both felt justified when approached by tourists asking them directions in French. Malva lost a button on her suit jacket in the suburb

south of Paris called Gif Sur Yvette. She explained her problem in French to a small boy playing along the curb, pointed to a duplicate button on the other lapel, and by golly, he found the lost one for her. This small incident did more to convince her of the vital need for foreign language study than all the months of French verb-conjugating, dialogue memorization, and person-number substitution drills she had had at school.

Our French friends showed us some off-beat sides of French life, like Saturday dinner in the family home, and the little-known country villa near Paris of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, complete with windmill, farm acres, and a gardener just to tend the flowers.

David, a nineteen-year-old British friend of the family from London, was also spending his holiday in Paris with his classmate Simon. The boys looked us up on several occasions. Both, very refined, very reserved college boys had come to Paris to verify the truth in the old saying, "There are no girls like French girls." But whenever the occasion presented itself to meet such girls (and they did arise), these two men-of-the-world pleaded a previous engagement and used us as proof.

Our final evening in Paris was one we'll never forget. After our day in the country with our French friends, we left them with promises to meet in England, and took the train back to Paris for a night at the opera to see "Carmen". During the first intermission we strolled into the lobby for some refreshment and came face to face with, of all people, Miss Radbill, Malva's French teacher from Haverford Sr. High School, and six of her classmates along for the Easter trip to France. After close to three months away from the U.S.A. and home, we were close to tears on this unexpected encounter. Even the guards and attendants on duty, stiff and unbending when distributing seats and checking tickets, relented a bit when explained the situation, let both Malva and Lois move over and sit with the group for the rest of the performance, and even delayed a bit dimming the lights in the corridors at closing time so we might all have a few more minutes together. It was truly a memorable climax to a glorious week.

We returned from our exciting stay in Paris to an exciting homecoming in Maidstone; while we were away, our cottage had been burglarized, a window wedged open, contents of drawers and closets emptied all over the floor, the telephone ripped from the wall, the front door left ajar, but surprisingly nothing taken, although a camera, American money, a portable typewriter, liquor, etc., had all been in full view in the living room. The police and fingerprint experts had come, the laboratory had sent representatives who had set things in order, but since

they had had no forwarding address in Paris for us, we didn't hear of all the excitement until we got home. With all the violence and riots in the U.S.A., it seems strange that we had to come to quiet old Maidstone to get our share of the same.

In the midst of all this, Joe's brother arrived from California (he was attending a physics conference in Manchester) so, although we get together only on occasion back home, all things seem possible and come to pass in England.

What else can we say? We love Europe, the excitement, the respect for learning, the old mingled with the new, the easy accessibility of many cultures, but we miss home, its friends, its comforts, and its familiarity.