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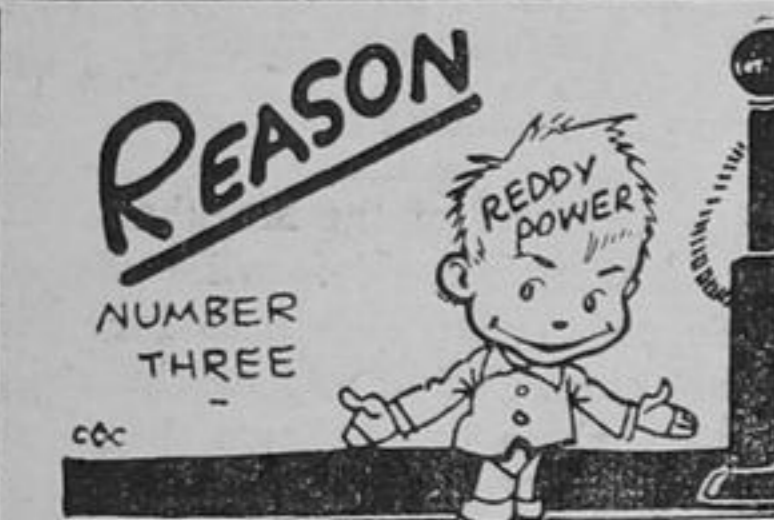
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Life Goes on as Usual In Ancient English Village Despite War's Alarms

By Margaret Butcher

Somewhere in England—This time I feel as if I am writing to you from another planet. Nearly three weeks ago I had come to this little country town on family business, and real life has faded further and further into the distance with every day. Of course, I am as homesick as a child; I lie in bed o' nights and wonder what the Allotment is doing, and if the sheep-dog still sniffs inquiringly under my door. Every now and then my friends ever heard 'Do hurry back'; but who ever heard of family business which allowed itself to be hurried? There is a constant influx of solicitors, auctioneers and callers of all kinds, and one or the other of us seems to be endlessly writing letters or sorting out rubbish. What a life!

We have no radio and no electricity. Consequently my mind is now as dim as my eyesight. Occasional trickles of news come through from some neighbour, but, to all intents and purposes, the war might be five thousand miles away. True, soldiers march or stroll past these windows all day, and there are barriers at each end of the main street, but there is a kind of spurious peace about the place which irks me. I feel that no place in this country should suggest peace to such an extent. Well, I suppose I must be lenient with the old town — which was a little town, quiet and settled, in those far-off days before the Romans came to Britain!

Grey Main Street

Only those of you who know England can picture such a place. The main street, which wanders down into the valley, is narrow and grey, with shops and private houses, cheek by jowl, flat against the narrow sidewalk. Almost everything is built of the local grey stone, and every shop has a morbid fancy for brown paint on its woodwork. Half way down the street widens to an irregular square, and there stands the ancient market cross and the last of the old stalls or shambles — the latter roofed over with old red tiles and looking just as it did in the Middle Ages. Here and there some ugly building of the Diamond Jubilee period raises its head as a bank or Municipal building; and how those buildings have shrunk since I saw them as a child! They seemed very tall and grand then—as did many of the people. I have met a lot of those people again during the last three weeks and, like the houses, they have grown short, podgy and not at all awe-inspiring.

I come face to face with somebody in the High Street and I find myself thinking, Now, who IS that? And presently a name swims up from the depths of memory. So this (I think) is the Miss So-and-so who once scared me nearly to death with her severe glances at me; this is the Mr. Whatnot who used to look so tall and important. As far as I can make out, nobody has died; they are all here still, and living in the same houses. An astonishing place. I have just popped in to see the old dear who used to sell me candies when I came here as a kiddie. She is a cripple now, and there is a strange face over the counter; but upstairs my old friend sits looking out, and beneath a thatch of white hair the same twinkling blue eyes laughed at me. She was tickled to death when I told her — quite truthfully — that I have never bought a packet of candy since those days without having a picture of her somewhere at the back of my mind.

My Old Nurse, Alice

Then there is 'Old Alice,' who nursed me, many a time, when I was a baby. Alice is seventy-five now, but her pretty hair is still brown, and she can cook with anybody. Every morning Alice comes along and smooths the path of life for us, weeps over me a little and looks as

if, with the slightest encouragement, she would still pick me up and nurse me, bless her.

Alice makes up for a lot; because I do not think I could ever live in this kind of little town. Not for long. All those bits of gossip and those social distinctions — so very baffling to one who can't see a pin of difference between the status of one person and another! — are troublesome. I am sure I should horrify everybody by getting to know all the "wrong people"—and find them ever so much more interesting than the right ones.

Even up in the cemetery there is a strong smack of social exclusiveness, I observe. There is a tendency for the Best People to herd together under large and expensive looking stones, while the rank and file are just so many little green mounds on the side of the hill — and so infinitely more pleasant to look at. I fancy that I am being a shade difficult to "place," for I am behaving in an indiscriminate manner, talking to this person and that, and being equally discouraging to all who show signs of interrupting me when I am working.

And what work it has been! A salvage truck has already rolled away from the door, positively filled to the brim with good stuff for the war effort. And it has made me wonder if we are tackling our old folk in the right way? There must be a wealth of salvage in almost every house in this long street, if only one could persuade these people to send for the truck and throw useless sentiment overboard. After all, of what real sentimental value is a bundle of bits and rags weighing over a hundred pounds, and who really gets any joy out of a trunk filled with old newspapers or a back room stocked with bits of old metal? And where is the pleasure in pictures hung in dark, unseen corners? I have come to the conclusion that we ought to have a new slogan:

"Grandmas Must Give It Up."

Just think about it, Grandmas, will you? This house has been a revelation of useless hoarding, and there must be houses like it all over the world. Now the whole place looks brighter, fresher, more pleasant to live in — and certainly more easy to keep clean. What is more, it is far less likely to make a funeral pyre for somebody, should an incendiary plop down on one of these nights. And munitions are all that much the richer. Yes, give it a thought, Grandma. It's worth it.

The Gardening Partner, in his usual blithe spirits, has taken pen to paper. He tells me that the new potatoes were left in too long to be really new; the lettuce and spinach have colted to seed, and if we don't get rain soon 'everything will perish.' He completes his effort by putting the wrong address on the envelope, but since all is known about everybody here (and then some) the letter reached me without delay. I surmise that the G. P., taking everything into consideration, is enjoying himself in his own quiet way. It is only when he bursts into jollity that I feel something is really wrong.

So here's hoping that life will soon resume its normal trend for me: life with its digging and chatter, its old friends and fresh ideas, its atmosphere of inspiring struggle. After all, one is happier that way, even when the news is not so good, and the rations less plentiful than they are here. I have been promised a welcome home; and back I shall go, a little dingier from living for weeks in a suitcase a little more determined never, never to hoard. I have lost a job through this untimely interruption in my affairs, but who knows? Something better may come along. Anyway, the sight of that bulging truck made up for much; never was an out-of-work further away from despair.

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