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Report From Britain, 31 October 1949

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

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Aberdeen, Scotland
October 31, 1949

This is the strange, sad saga of the plight of the bewildered Silver entourage in a foreign country, written to demonstrate difficulties inherent in the idea of one-world. There are five of us: the old man, whose job is to impart a fleeting glimpse of Yankee history to students at Kings College; the wife, Dutch, who grows tiresome boasting of her McLean and Akin ancestry and discussing the intricacies of tartan patterns; Frankie Wilson, eighteen-year old niece, who has discovered that the only warm place in Scotland is in the bed; and Billy, aged ten, and Betty, six, who remain amusing with their peculiar Southern manners and speech to the boys in the Grammar School and the young ladies of Girls High.

Sometimes it is hard for us to remember that we have the same ancestors and language as these British people we like so much. For instance -----

You may well imagine the raised eyebrows of a dignified, newly met lady the other night when I suggested that her husband take off his vest. We were attending a very small, quite informal dinner party where the heat and the conviviality seemed to indicate such action, but my chagrin must have popped out when it was pointed out to me that I had really asked the man to discard his undershirt. That same day I discovered, having purchased a pair of British socks, that they come nearly up to the knees and are kept in place not by gaiters but by suspenders. Suspenders, you know, are really braces.

There may be asuterity in the Britisher's diet but not in the number of his partakings of food. Judging by the quantity consumed, I'd say that five meals a day over here are normal, three the same as ours with tea and late supper thrown in. Of course that does not preclude sundry other cups of tea throughout the day. But never be too certain of what you are eating. A soda cracker is a water biscuit and a cookie is a biscuit but a biscuit is a scone with sugar. Blackberries are brambles, oats are oats but more likely to be corn, while corn, naturally is

maize. A dessert is not usually a sweet, nor a sweet sweet, and a sweet may be followed by a savorie.

All of which is very simple when compared to our trying to teach the kids that pushing food on the back of the fork with a pusher (small knife) and then carrying the food to the mouth in the left hand is good form over here but that they had better forget it when they return to America.

The other day Frankie was pouring tea when one of her customers remarked on the presence of three strangers in the cup. Having in mind a few friendly southern gnats, the horrified young lady immediately offered to get rid of the offending cup and to pour another. That is, until she discovered that the strangers were parts of tea leaves which had been deposited on the edge of the cup and were really good omens to be used in predicting the future.

As my half-dozen loyal readers probably know, over here a radio is a wireless, a barber is a hairdresser, general delivery is poste restante, football is soccer, hunting is shooting, a stream is a burn which may be running through a den or even a corrie, a doctor's office is his surgery with or without medical instruments, a slaughterhouse is a knackery, a brae is a hill, and a corporation has nothing to do with free enterprise.

You don't ask for long distance but for a trunk, you go to a chemist instead of a druggist, you don't reserve a pullman but you do book a sleeper, and you deposit your bags in the left luggage. You buy bread unwrapped, meat hangs unrefrigerated in the butcher shop, and you may smoke in the theater. At a formal dinner, however, you don't smoke until after the toast to the King. And, to answer a query from Mississippi, banks are not called shilling stations.

For awhile we stayed at the Northern Hotel, a four story building. To get to our rooms on the top floor - the third to the British - we took not the elevator but the lift. Amazing as it may seem, over here an escalator is called - an escalator.

We're getting used to these things. Without being the slightest bit self conscious, this morning I told the tram conductor to take out a "tuppence" and mentally noted that from a shilling I received a sixpence, a "thruppence", and a penny in change.

This will now be mailed, provided that I'm not run down by left handed traffic. That is, it will be if I remember not to post my letter in the big green box (which is connected with electricity) but to patronize the red contraption which the Post Office furnishes at every convenient corner. Fire hydrants? Apparently they are under the ground.

Yes, we have run into what to us are strange customs. British and Americans speak, with considerable variations in pronunciation, the same language. Billy hesitated long before coming to Scotland because he had been told that he would have to wear a skirt and that his school mates wouldn't understand him. His fears have been dispelled but in many cases it is still true that while the words are the same the tune has been changed. Well, at least we won't expect to understand and be understood when we journey to France, Italy, and Switzerland. Cheerio. Awa' the noo.

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