

Newcastle-on-Tyne

April 18th, 1943

Dear Family,

I don't think I've written to you for quite a long time – Life has been uneventful and there hasn't been much to write about.

Spring has been in full swing – the trees all bursting out, and the daffodils and other flowers ablaze. We thought we might get a cold snap to make up for the mild winter, but we have gone straight on with warm sunny days, though I suppose there is still time for snow and ice. We had a few days last week of hurricane wind, and on the worst of them the King and Queen were paying a visit to Newcastle. They must have had a horrid time with dust and everything moveable swirling about, trying to keep their hats and their smiles on. I should have liked to have seen them, but they were only here during working hours.

Double summer-time has started and the long, light evenings are pleasant. They have their disadvantages though; my room that used to look very cosy by artificial light when I came home, now looks dusty and grubby with the sunlight streaming into it, and I feel I have to set to work to clean it when I get in.

I spent last weekend at Wylam with Cousin Mabel Kaye and family. Her son-in-law, with whom she lives, has just been moved to Bristol, so the whole household is departing next month. I am sorry. They have been very kind to me, and it was a nice house to go to – only about 10 miles from Newcastle, but in quite country surroundings.

I visited a lovely old house last week – Blagdon Hall, the home of Lord and Lady Ridley. It came about in a rather funny way – When I was in Sweden, I met an American girl who was very friendly and occasionally writes to me. In one letter about a year ago, she said she was very busy sewing "Bundles for Britain", and that their particular bundles were all sent to a babies' hospital near Blagdon Hall in Northumberland, where the owners had given half the house to be used as a hospital. A few weeks ago, I had a patient who is a lady's maid there and evidently an old and trusted servant. I told her about this girl, and she said they were kept entirely supplied with clothes by this sewing circle in New Jersey, which had also sent them large sums of money, with which they had equipped the hospital. The next time she came for treatment she brought me an invitation from Lady Ridley to go and see over it. It was a lovely day – the large park-like grounds were very pretty, though not able to be kept up properly just now. I had tea with the family – the house was full of beautiful furniture, pictures etc. Lady Ridley is a daughter of Sir Edward Luytens (who designed the Cenotaph) and is very artistic. Then I was taken over the hospital wing which was all very interesting. It has been very adequately fitted up as a hospital, but retains a nice home-like atmosphere, and one of its distinctions is that they take the mothers in with their sick babies and they seemed to enjoy the stay there.

The hospital was evacuated there at the beginning of the war, but I should think would stay on permanently. Indeed, I think it will be the fate of all the English mansions, as I don't think that it will ever be possible to run them as private houses again. To combine the two seems a good compromise, though that must require good management.

Next weekend is Easter. We had hoped to have several days off, but are only getting Good Friday and Easter Monday, so the Saturday morning's work and Sunday night's fire-watching rather spoilt it. However, I daresay the object is to keep people at home and off the trains. I have decided to go to Warkworth, a little way up the coast. I shall take my bicycle and go backwards and forwards.

My holidays come in May. I had intended to go to Scotland and spend a very quiet time, but a letter from Win Pratt (with whom I went to the Lakes) has changed my plans. She has been very ill with her

heart and has to do nothing for 3 months and never work again, at least, not at massage. She is on the mend now and wants to join forces with me for a short holiday, so I am going down to Surrey with her for a week, so she won't have much travelling, and then I shall spend a week with Susie.

29th April

I have just come back from my Easter holiday, which was a great success after all. I managed to beg off fire-watching, and just before I left work on Thursday, the secretary sent word to our boss to release as many as possible on the Saturday morning and I was the lucky one who was let off, as I had planned the longest journey and had had a cold. It was decent of the others to do my work for me, and I had a clear 4 days away, coming back by a train at 6:30am on Easter Tuesday.



Warkworth is a delightful little village about a mile from the sea. It is on the river Coquet, a very pretty winding river, and is encircled by it on 3 sides. It is overshadowed by a large and really very beautiful, ruined castle on the top of a steep hill.

The beach is, of course, barred by barbed wire, but it is pleasant on the sand-hills just behind. Though, to tell the truth, I never find the North Sea very attractive. I have never seen it

looking other than a yellowy-grey colour, and it always looks cold and wind-whipped. I daresay it has its moments, but I haven't been there then. You can see the sea in the distance in the enclosed postcard, and the river winding round.

Inland there is pretty country and I pottered about a bit on my bicycle, but not as much as I had intended owing to a strong gale blowing all the time. It was a pleasant little holiday, though, and I found quite nice, friendly people at the boarding house.

Have you had "In Which we Serve" out there yet? It is a fine picture.



Everyone was very elated and thankful over the news from Tunisia. It is hard to realise it is all over. It has been a wonderful piece of co-operation work on the part of all concerned and the difficulties to be overcome – transport etc – must have been colossal. I have been at home all day today, sewing and getting ready for my holiday next week, so I have had the wireless on a lot and have listened to some very stirring broadcasts about it.

'Marching On', a description of the whole campaign was good and Eric Linklater's play 'The Great Ship' was very fine.

I wonder how much of the BBC programmes you get? I know the news once a day, but do you get anything outstanding relayed?

Have just read 'The Yearling' by Margaret Rawlings and recommend it – No connection with the foregoing – it just came into my head.

Good night, Bless you all – love from, Rachel

Newcastle-on-Tyne

June 5th 1943

Dear Family,

Back from holidays, having had a very enjoyable time. I planned it on rather quiet lines this year as I had had a lot of colds etc through the winter and I thought a rest was indicated. Also, of course, my companion for the first week, Win Pratt, had to go quietly.

I left all the arrangements to her, and she found a hotel at Hindhead in Surrey with a nice garden and a good table. Hindhead has the reputation of being very healthy. It is a little patch of high, sandy country, growing mostly pine trees, and with lovely views all round. We had a week of unbroken sunshine and spent nearly all sitting in the garden and going for gentle walks. Our only long expedition was a day at Ailsa Bragg's farm. Hindhead was half-an-hour on the bus from Farnham and I went over there for several times to do bits of shopping and once to have tea with Cousin Jean Fowler. She has aged a good deal and is rather pathetic, living alone in a much-too-large house with a dog and some fowls, and rarely able to get any help.

I had a funny time getting to Hindhead – I had had laryngitis for some days but thought it no good waiting for my voice to come back before setting out. I meant to leave by an early morning train, but my alarm clock failed to function, so I got one about midday. It was several hours late, and I arrived at the nearest station to Hindhead at about 10:15 instead of 8pm. The last bus had gone, no taxis were available, and I had no voice to telephone to the hotel. The porter said it was 2 miles away and it was a lovely night, so I left my case and set out on foot. After walking for more than an hour I met a man who told me it was another 2½ miles! It was now getting dark but there was nothing to do but plod on. About a mile further a kindly soldier picked up my wilting remains and deposited them at the now sleeping hotel. The proprietress had to be waked and my story poured into her unsympathetic ear in husky whispers. It was all the more awkward as we were boarded out down the street and it meant waking another house. However, I finally got to bed. Winifred, had, of course, given me up for the night but was pleased to see me.

The second week I spent with Susie in London. She has a flat in a garden-city part of London, near Golders Green. It is quite like being in the country – trees and flowers everywhere, and Arthur has an allotment about 5 minutes away on Hampstead Heath, where he works every evening. Susie still works at munitions. I didn't see Rosemary this time, but she is growing up quickly and thinking of going to a domestic science school next year.

I saw the Putney Roberts and was sorry I just missed Gerald, who left for home about a week before. The stock in the London shops seemed a lot poorer than last year, but I wasn't wanting to shop much anyway. Town was more crowded than ever with foreigners, American soldiers preponderating. Indeed, it was quite a matter for remark if one saw an English officer – that is excluding the R.A.F., there were hundreds of them.

Restaurants were very crowded and most have gone over to cafeteria style.

I saw a couple of theatres – One 'Claudia' had in it a clever little actress with a very lame leg which she seemed able to disregard and make you forget.

I had planned to go and see Llewyn and Joan Roberts one day, but was prevented at the last minute. Llewyn is back in the army and quite strong again and they have just adopted a little boy of a year old, David. I was sorry not to see them. They are stationed in Essex.

Well, that seems to be the end of my news.

We are relieved to have Mr Churchill safely back in England again.

Love to you all,
Rachel

Newcastle-on-Tyne

July 29th, 1943

Dear Family,

I seem to have let over a month elapse since I wrote last, so here goes to gather up what news I can find.

I have just had a very pleasant long weekend at Alnmouth a little seaside town a few miles north of Warkworth, where I went last time. Gwen Roberts was staying at a hotel there with a friend and wrote to see if I could spend a day with them. As it happened to be my long weekend, I went off first thing on Saturday morning hoping that I might find somewhere to spend the night. Of course, everywhere was full up. I even went to half-a-dozen farms offering to help with the hay-making in the hope of getting a bed at one of them, but they weren't starting to gather the hay till Monday and had no spare beds. At the last minute, a booking was cancelled at Gwen's hotel, so I was lucky. It was glorious weather, the restrictions for going onto the beach were lifted at the moment and a gap made in the barbed wire so we had two lovely days. Lots of people were swimming but it looked too cold for me – a gradually shelving beach with no waves, so that it was hard to get wet above the knees. For once the North Sea looked blue and sparkling.

Gwen's friend, with the odd name of Moss Runciman, is head of all the YMCA canteens in the North and she took us to see a very super one in Alnmouth, where many soldiers are stationed. A rich old lady living in a rather showy mansion has given it all over to them except a couple of rooms where she lives. The soldiers, in their battle dress and heavy boots looked a bit out of place among the thick velvet carpets, priceless ornaments etc., but I expect they enjoyed it all. There was a lovely view over the beach and sea from all the windows and billiard tables, a fine library, and every sort of amusement for them.

August 6th

Have just had another weekend away – August Bank holiday. I spent it at a military camp with Moss Runciman. She runs the YMCA canteen at a Battle School, where troops are given the final polish off to their training – an intensive and very tough course. A few pick men are sent from each regiment, so they are a fine lot. When I was there, they were mostly from Scotch regiments, in a fascinating variety of kilts, and Guards who all have to be over 6ft in height. The camp was a little town of huts, and little Jeep tanks ran about everywhere. I stayed at the YMCA hut and found it an interesting experience. We stayed in bed till 10 or 11am, cut sandwiches, mountains of them, all afternoon; served the men with food, drinks, stamps, cigarettes etc from 6 till 9; and the officers from 9pm till 1 or 2am. Then we had our evening meal and went to bed. Moss is a jolly person with a remarkable personality and the men loved her and it was all very cheerful.

Travelling has been very difficult during the summer. We are asked not to travel unless absolutely necessary, but it is hard not to when so many people are away from their homes, living in camps, digs etc. I always stick to trains (cum bicycle), as busses are impossible but the queues for the trains stretch across the station and away down the streets outside, and it is hard to find out which queue leads to which train. The trains are of a phenomenal length. Going to Alnmouth I enquired which end the van for my bicycle was likely to be and was told the front, so I waited there. When the train came in that van wasn't opened, so I had to rush to the other end of the train, which was beyond the platform and handed up my bicycle, but by that time the train was crammed full and lots of people couldn't get on. I went back to the van and asked if I might travel with the bicycle, but got my head bitten off "Certainly not, and if you're not going on the train get your bike off quickly". However, I thought I would go on the 9am so shoved and squirmed till I got myself into a corridor, though with

my rucksack sticking out so that the door wouldn't shut. Eventually I got in. Of course, this is only so bad in summer as over here everyone has their annual holidays at the same time – between May and September.

17th August

The news is grand lately. Sicily successfully over, and Russia and the bombing offensive going well. We wonder where the next blow will be struck. Isn't it grand to feel that we are doing the striking not waiting apprehensively!

I am hoping for a batch of letters soon as I haven't had any for about 2 months and some of you have doubtless written – I expect they will all come together.

Work goes on as usual and I am very fit and cheerful. Have seen some good pictures - 'We Live at Dawn' and 'Sergeant York' being two of them.

Much love to you all. Rachel

Pitlochry, Scotland

Sept 3rd, 1943

Dear Family,

Here I am on the wander again, having a wonderful holiday in Scotland. A tremendous lot of variety has been crammed into 10 days, the weather has been kind, and it is all very delightful.

I had intended just to go to a hotel, not knowing what else to do and not thinking it would be possible to move about much, but when I was down South in May I met Jean Fowler, who suggested accompanying me, so I left all the arrangements to her, and a very nice trip she planned. I felt a little dubious, as she is old and frail now, but she has stood up to the travelling well.

She came to a hotel in Newcastle a few days before so as to break the journey, and I spent the first night of my holidays with her there so as to get a good start in the morning, and we were successful in getting seats on the train. We passed through Edinburgh but didn't get out there, changed trains at Aberdeen, and went on to a little town called Huntley. There we stayed at the Manse for 2 days with Cos J's niece, who is married to the minister. It was a typical Scotch home – simple and kindly – no shortage of food, lots of various sorts of scones, buns, cookies etc that they eat at their 'high tea' at 5:30. It was a nice little town with the usual picturesque old castle where the old Lairds of the Glen used to live, now ruined. The country about was rich and intensively farmed.

Then we went on for 3 days to Nairn, a little seaside town, taking Margaret, the niece, with us. There we stayed in a most comfortable hotel and enjoyed sunny days on the beach with a pretty view across the firth of Moray. Margaret and I went on a long expedition one day; we went to Inverness, and from there took a bus that took us right across to the west of Scotland and back to Fort William – along the Caledonian Canal and the banks of Loch Ness, and the other string of lakes you will see on the map. It was all very beautiful and interesting and the heather, though just past its best, painted all the hills purple. Scotland is wider and wilder than England, many of the hills are bare of trees and you get wonderful colour effects as the light is constantly changing – heavy clouds, sudden shafts of sunlight, soft mists etc.

Next Cos. Jean and I went on to stay with another nephew of hers, Freeland Barbour, at Fincastle near Pitlochry (where we are now). This must be quite one of the show places of Scotland – it is simply heavenly. The house is on a big country estate, situated on the top of a hill, and looking over ranges of mountains in every direction. There are lovely trees all about, miles of fir forests, a very pretty lake not far from the house where they swim, boat, fish for trout, and in winter skate. It is a very jolly household, 5 children belonging to it and innumerable visiting children for the holidays, evacuees whose parents are in foreign parts etc. I can't keep count of them all. The men and boys in the household all wear kilts and look very nice, and it is as Scotch as the Manse, but quite different. I am very lucky to have seen Scotland under such happy circumstances, and don't like the idea of going back to work tomorrow. I shall be leaving Cos J. in Edinburgh and arriving in Newcastle at about 2am.

The pass of Killiecrankie, where the battle was fought, is just below the house. The Scots, in 1689, trapped the English in the deep gorge,

I have just been watching the young people dancing reels and other Scotch dances in the dining room. They do them with great zest and energy and love them. There are 3 big houses full of children in the glen so they join forces for their amusements and have been mountain climbing today, but they seem to have plenty of energy left for dancing – the floor has been shaking under 20 pairs of feet and swinging kilts. I warmed myself up with one of the simpler dances.

It is a very wholesome life for children – they run wild but are not spoiled. There is a strong religious

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1943

background to their lives – family prayers etc – but their high spirits and gaiety are in no way hampered.

The oldest son is in Sicily and writes graphic letters about it all.

Well, I must stop.

Love to all Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1943

Newcastle-on-Tyne

Nov 22nd, 1943

Dear Family,

There doesn't seem to be an atom of news since I wrote last month – at least nothing worth writing about. Winter is creeping on, but it hasn't been very cold yet, only damp and foggy. I always feel winter is really here when the black-out is still drawn when I leave in the morning, and we shall reach that this week.

Newcastle is full of colds and a mild flu. I had a day off work last week with something of the sort, but it passed very quickly, probably due to the injections I have been having.

I have started my new job and think I shall like it. At present it seems to consist mostly of walking miles of corridors and long wards to see what the students are doing and tell them not to!

I have had one weekend away lately at Wooler, a windswept little town among the Cheviot Hills, cold but beautiful country – I stayed with an ex-patient. I brought home a bag of rose hips and with the help of a couple of apples turned them into jelly, (full of vitamin C they are supposed to be). Nothing edible is wasted in this country at the moment.

Have had a few good theatres here lately prior to their London season – 'Ten Little Nigger Boys', a thriller in which 8 of the little nigger boys are killed one by one on the stage or just off it – the remaining 2, of course, get married!

And 'There Shall be no Night', a tragic but very good play about the invasion of Greece in 1941.

Nov 29th

I may be making a move of lodgings soon as the landlady, a person of variable moods, wants my bedroom for a maid. She will give me a divan bed to put in my big room, so it may be alright, and I will give it a trial, but she is not prepared to reduce the rent, which I feel rather sore about. However, it would be a room less to clean, which is something of a relief.

My little wireless has broken down again, this time, it appears, for good, and I miss it very much. I have been toying with the idea of getting a crystal set as it should be much cheaper than the other sort.

Much love to you all, and good luck for 1944.

Rachel