

Eavesdropping

I overheard recently a conversation between two ladies of mature years outside the Milton Co-op. I did not know their names, but for the sake of this tale, let us call them Phyllis and Rennie. They were talking about a woman about the same age as themselves.



“She never had a good word to say about her husband,” said Phyllis, *“I know”* replied Rennie. *“She nagged him from morn ’til night. No wonder he spent more time on his allotment than he did at home.”*

“Ah that potting shed could tell a few stories, he didn’t go down there just to chit his spuds,” Phyllis said.

A Whistling ’Ooman

Listening to these two made me think of an old local saying: ‘A nagging ’ooman and a crowin’ hen, yent no good to God or man’. It should be a whistling ’ooman, but I’ve took poetic licence which is free unlike a marriage licence which used to be 7/6d, but was she worth it? Statistics show that generally women still have a greater life span than men. They certainly did over seventy years ago, at least twenty years longer.

How picturesque those old cottage gardens were long ago - scented roses grew around the door, the droning of bees on high summer days, the dawn chorus of bird song on a May spring morning. How idyllic it all was, while at the bottom of the garden was the pig sty and dyke (lavatory). But what has this got to do with women living longer than men you may well ask?

Bumped Off

If we went back a hundred years, we would find that many country girls still knew the medical properties of plants found in the hedgerow and fields.

One of the flowers found in cottage gardens was the foxglove. Need I explain more? There could have been many a dear old man, like myself, whose only fault was not wanting to wash or shave each day or only changed his socks and shirt once a month and who began to dribble far more than Stanley Matthews. These dear old men, just like me, full of wisdom and rustic charm, who were slowly bumped off by their wives - wives who thought they were still young enough to go gallivanting out when they should have thought it an honour and a privilege to stay with those dear old men like me and wait on them hand, foot and finger.

I remember some of these black widows in their dark Victorian long dresses. Some of them would meet each day in cottage parlours with curtains drawn, reading tea-leaves and concocting lotions and potions and vanishing creams to treat swelling.

Long ago it was thought if a young lady ate too much new bread this would cause a swelling. Could there be any more nostalgic picture of old England than these guiltless old ladies biking past the cricket match on the village green on their way to evensong in Church on Sunday evening where they would sing that tiresome hymn, *All things bright and beautiful* or *Now the day is over*.

Fred Russell