

I LIKE my little town. Principally for what doesn't happen there. In sober fact, my little town is remarkable for the number of things which could happen there—and don't. This doesn't mean that life is not exciting. We haven't had a murder for 60 years, but in that time nine pubs have been burnt down and one washed down the river and out to sea. The lights were still burning too. We haven't had a large-scale robbery since the flotation of our last gold-mining company, we haven't had any violence to speak of since Chew Lee gave free oranges to the children in the St. Pat's day procession. But it did rain five inches one day last August and a car did fall into the Gorge a week later.

To-day it is raining. Raining on the little houses with their galvanised iron roofs and sides, on the unfinished (but so magnificent) Town Hall, on the river and on the whitebaiters, on the 17 pubs and the four churches. It rains on the just and the unjust alike. On the police sergeant and the local bookie. The sergeant is on his beat between the two ends of the town, the bookie is on his beat between his two telephones. Saturday morning in the rain.

CARS slosh along the main street. Pedestrians slosh along the footpaths. Perhaps everyone doesn't really know everyone else, but it is advisable to nod left and right as one walks. An answering nod and a remark about the weather confirm your surmise that you really do know that one. Little groups at the street corners are fluid. There is a constant come and go among them. The knowledgeable discussion of horse flesh floats outwards and is dissipated in the rain. There is a friendly hum of horsey conversation from the bars, punctuated by the cheery tinkle and whirr of the cash register.

There are no queues in our little town. The tradespeople know everyone, and when chocolates or oranges are "in," one finds one's share of the consignment delivered along with the rest of the order. Yes, delivered. Trade vans are busy most days and boys on bicycles busy all days. Cigarettes are always adequate, partly, I suppose, because we get a good allocation, partly because everyone gets a fair share. Of course we have our black markets but they don't last long. Everyone knows in short order. And then it just can't be a black market any longer. It is whispered around that illicit butter or cigarettes can be obtained somewhere or other. Pork too, in the days of its prohibition. But as everyone soon knows, few are able to cash in on their knowledge.

I like the people in my little town because even if my business is their business they'll give a hand with it as readily as they'll poke a nose into it. If I fall ill, total strangers stop sympathetically beside my hospital bed and leave me unsolicited smokes. My chances of getting a State house will be eagerly canvassed by the kindest busybodies that I have ever known. When it got around that I was having difficulty in

I LIKE MY LITTLE TOWN

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arriving at a name for my infant daughter (I had several ready for a son), some very suitable suggestions came over the phone. Party line, of course. If I entertain, my guests will clink musically as they scrub their feet on my doormat. If I am worried my little town will share my worries, and somehow that makes it the less.

LIVING is cheap in my little town. Housing is a problem, but it is the only one. I order coal. "Denniston, Cascade, Charming Creek, Burley's or Charleston?" politely asks the coalman. And that day the coalman staggers in with the bags on his back and dumps the good shining lumps with a deafening roar into my coal bin. No wonder he staggers. The bags contain the best part of two hundredweight—and he charges me four bob for it. "If you lemme have the bag back." Of course I do. Otherwise it would have cost me four and six, but then I'd have a tattered coal bag to do what I would with.

"They" have just completed levelling and tar-sealing our roads, which are now ever so much better surfaced than our footpaths. As a result, we all walk on the roads. Why not? Drivers of vehicles know all us pedestrians and make allowances accordingly. Strange drivers take one glance at our traffic and waves of caution sweep over them. Naturally all this doesn't apply to the "Main Street." Here we walk on the footpaths and gaze into the shop windows. If you should hear one of us say, "I bumped into old Jim in the main street yesterday," it is



"We all go to fires"

probably literally true. We bump our way from end to end and you really should see our Main Street on Friday night. It's true we have pedestrian crossings but mostly they are convenient places to meet the fellow from the other side. Occasionally they are useful

refuges for men driven from the footpaths by the perambulators. Three prams abreast can clear our footpaths as effectively as a street collection or a fire. We all go to fires. When the siren sounds the volunteer brigade leaps into action. Our brigade consists of a dozen or so firemen resplendent in blue and red and brass clinging precariously to our 1927 model fire-engine—and several hundred small



"Clearly the fault lay with the passengers"

boys on bicycles with another several hundred on the bars thereof—and their parents, and their sisters and their cousins and their aunts. A smart save by the brigade is extraordinarily unpopular among the late-comers.

This siren-induced activity does not apply however, to the banshee wail at 8.30 a.m. The siren is tested daily at that time and we all set our watches by it. A fire at 8.25 a.m. would disorganise our day. "Would" did I say? One did.

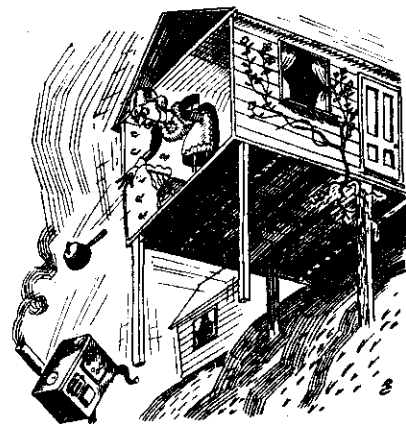
THE wail of the siren is varied by the hooting of coastal vessels ready for sea. The hoarse coughing bellow of the ship's whistle echoes in the 17 bars along the main street. It has a familiar sound to the firemen in all those snug little retreats. But familiarity has bred contempt. Next time perhaps! Ships must sail on the top of the tide so there's an enforced punctuality about their departure. That punctuality, however, does not apply to any other form of activity in our little town. Even the pictures are a little late in starting—the trains too. Indeed, one very dirty night the guard signalled his train out and after he had collected the tickets, found himself still at the platform. The engine-driver had made a complementary discovery seven miles along the route. At the subsequent inquiry the stationmaster was found blameless; so was the shunter who did the coupling, so was the driver and so was the guard. Clearly the fault lay with the passengers.

But that was on our main line. We have a branch line too. It runs (or used to run) seven miles. Its normal freight was stone for the harbour works but passengers were also carried. These last could imagine themselves, owing to the

condition of the permanent way, to be travelling on the only train in the world with triangular wheels.

Not that we complain, of course. We are prepared to defend our little town to the last ditch. Frequently we are called upon to do so. On these occasions we point with pride to the achievements abroad of our ex-townfolk. Most of us can point out the house in which so-and-so was born. He is now doing well in Sydney, or maybe it's London. We all recognise that London is considerably bigger than Wellington and success there is correspondingly more dazzling—even if the details of that success do tend to be a little vague. Still, the solid fact is that so-and-so was born here. There are dozens who remember him as a boy, and their recollection of him grows ever sharper and more detailed with the passing years.

ON second thoughts perhaps we do complain a little. In the "good old days" we were the hub of the country. Our little town echoed with rumours of lucky strikes on the diggings—and a rush left town with each rumour. One old-timer told me of the odd bits of metal "about the size of half a grain of wheat" that used to get caught along with the gold on the tables of the sluicing claims. "And a great nuisance they were too," he said. "We used to throw them away, but there'd always be more next day." It's only in the last few years that the metal was found to be platinum. I wonder how much of it was



"The stove disappeared"

thrown away? Old-timers insist that the mother lode is back in the hills, stiff with gold. Most of them could tell you exactly where it is, if only they could remember, but anyway everything is altered back there since the earthquake.

The earthquake brought down all our chimneys, cut off our water, power and communications. So we straightened up our sagging wharf and returned thanks that earthquakes don't damage the sea. They do have unexpected results, however. One old woman lived alone in a house on the edge of a ravine. Her

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