

# Flora's Peverel



An historical play based on  
Flora Thompson's time in Liphook  
1916-1928

John Owen Smith

## **Flora's Peverel**

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# Flora's Peverel

## Second part of 'Grayshott to Griggs Green'

*Flora Thompson in Liphook 1916 - 1928*

*Flora came to Liphook in 1916 at the age of 39, when her husband John was appointed there as Postmaster. It was fifteen years since she had left the neighbouring village of Grayshott (her 'Heatherley') as a single girl, having herself worked as Assistant Postmistress there for nearly three years.*

*The Thompsons stayed in Liphook for twelve years, during which time their third child was born and Flora started to write more seriously than she had before.*

*She wrote no book like 'Heatherley' about this period of her life, but there is a large volume of her nature notes and other similar writings from which to piece together the background to her time in Liphook. Added to these notes, we have the historical records of the village and some verbatim memories from those still alive who remember the Thompson family.*

*True to her habit of fictionalising the names of real places and people, she gave the name 'Peverel' to Weavers Down, a favourite heath of hers which rises to the west of Liphook. She used this name in the title both of her published collection of nature notes ('The Peverel Papers') and the postal writers circle (the 'Peverel Society') which she started during this time.*

*For ten years the Thompsons lived in rented post office accommodation in the middle of the village, until they finally bought a home of their own – a house recently built at the very foot of Flora's beloved 'Peverel Down.' However her joy at this was to be short-lived, as her husband almost immediately applied for, and obtained, a promotion in Devonshire. She left Hampshire with a heavy heart, this time never to return.*

***A first play, "Flora's Heatherley," covers Flora's life in Grayshott from 1898–1901.***

# Flora's Peverel

## *Act 1 - 1916-18*

Prelude: Flanders, April 1916

Scene 1: Flora's garden in Bournemouth, April 1916

Scene 2: Canadian army camp, near Liphook, September 1916

Scene 3: Liphook Post Office, later that morning

Scene 4: Lynchmere Common

Scene 5: Flora's room, Liphook Post Office

Scene 6: On the road from Forest Mere

Scene 7: The Postmaster's House, soon after

Scene 8: On the Road with Maggie Tidy

Scene 9: Liphook Post Office, summer 1917

Scene 10: On Bramshott Common, later that day

Scene 11: Liphook Post Office, soon after

Scene 12: On the Road with Bill & Maggie Tidy

Scene 13: Flora's room, Liphook Post Office, early 1918

Scene 14: A street in Liphook, at the same time

Scene 15: Flora's room, Liphook Post Office, at the same time

Scene 16: Split scene - Flora and Louie

INTERVAL - Advertisement for Correspondence Courses, 1925

## *Act 2 - 1926-28*

Scene 17: An open space near Liphook, summer 1926

Scene 18: Liphook Post Office, a few days later

Scene 19: In the garden of the Postmaster's house, a few weeks later

Scene 20: Liphook Post Office, at the same time

Scene 21: On Weavers Down soon after

Scene 22: The Leggett's farm, Griggs Green, a few weeks later

Scene 23: 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, soon after

Scene 24: Liphook Post Office, early morning a few weeks later

Scene 25: Weavers Down, early spring 1927

Scene 26: The Telephone Exchange, Liphook Post Office

Scene 27: 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, soon after

Scene 28: Lynchmere Common

Scene 29: The Leggett's farm, Griggs Green, a few weeks later

Scene 30: Hewshott House, Liphook, summer 1927

Scene 31: 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, some time later

Scene 32: 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, autumn 1928

Scene 33: April 1937

Scene 34: May 1947

## Cast (ages: 1916-1928)

Postman (at Bournemouth)  
Flora Thompson (39-51 and 60 in 1937)  
John Thompson (42-54 and 73 in 1947)  
'Louie' Woods (19)  
Sergeant John Mumford (24)  
Harry Envis - a postman (30s)  
'Joe' Leggett (8 in 1916)  
Bill Tidy - a tinker (say 60s)  
Maggie Tidy, his wife (say 60s)  
Dr Ronald Campbell Macfie (50)  
Corporal (say 30s)  
Two Canadian soldiers (say 20s)  
Gypsy woman - (spry late 80s)  
Mrs Parkhurst from 'Heatherley' (62)  
Elsie Parkhurst, her youngest daughter (18)  
Winifred ('Diana') Thompson (22)  
Peter Thompson (8 in Oct 1926)  
'Joe' Leggett (18 in 1926)  
Eileen Leggett (16)  
Mrs Leggett, their mother - Irish (51)  
Capt. Byfield (60s?)  
Sam the shepherd (70s?)  
Chairman of cable company (60s)  
Peter Thompson (18 in March 1937)  
Richard Brownlow (60, non-speaking)  
Crowd at presentations (non-speaking)



# Flora's Peverel

## Prelude Scene in Flanders, April 1916

*A Blackout – 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' is played hesitantly on a harmonica.  
There are flashes and the sound of gunfire – after which, silence.*

### Scene 1

#### Flora's garden in Bournemouth, April 1916

*The postman arrives and greets Flora*

**Postman** Morning, Mrs Thompson – lovely day again. Can even start to believe it's spring, can't you.

**Flora** Yes, you can. And all the better for having the children up and about again.

**Postman** Thought I hadn't seen them around lately. Been ill, have they?

**Flora** Whooping cough, both of them. We had to miss seeing my brother last month because of it – when he was home on leave.

**Postman** Never mind – this weather'll soon put roses in their cheeks, won't it?

**Flora** Let's hope so.

**Postman** (*Hands her some letters*) Three for you today.

**Flora** Thank you.

**Postman** If I get my round done in time, you know, I fancy I'll do a spot of gardening this afternoon. Could do with a bit of a work-over after all that late snow we've had. Kept me indoors most of last month, it did, and ... Are you all right, Mrs Thompson?

*Flora is holding a returned letter she had sent to her brother*

Mrs Thompson?

**Flora** (*Flatly*) Edwin – killed in action.

**Postman** Your brother?

**Flora** My brother. My closest brother. The one we missed seeing. Now we'll never see him again. Ever.

### Scene 2

#### Canadian army camp, near Liphook, September 1916

*'Louie' Woods is delivering mail on her bicycle – Sgt John Mumford walks across her path*

**Louie** Hey, watch where you're going!

**Sgt Mumford** Sorry ma'am – too early in the morning for me – I'm still half asleep.

**Louie** All right for some – I have to be up before sunrise to get your post delivered.

**Sgt Mumford** And much appreciated too. Anything for Sgt John Mumford there?

**Louie** Goodness, *I* don't know. It's already sorted by the time I pick it up. The postmaster's wife gets up at four o'clock to do that.

**Sgt Mumford** Can't accuse you British of oversleeping.

**Louie** Not when there's a war on, or hadn't you noticed?

**Sgt Mumford** Yes, ma'am, I had. We're the latest draft – just over from Ontario.

**Louie** Your first week here?

**Sgt Mumford** My first day.

**Louie** Oh. Then I shouldn't think anything will've arrived for you yet.

**Sgt Mumford** Don't you believe it – my girl back home, she wrote to me before I even left – just to make sure I'd have something to open when I got here.

**Louie** Well, if I can get past you to the receiving office, you'll be able to find out.

**Sgt Mumford** Hey, is this the big British welcome we were told to expect here?

**Louie** It's the British postal system. Deliveries only to the office. You can pick it up from there.

**Sgt Mumford** All right, all right – you win Postie. I wouldn't want to foul up the system when I've only just arrived.

**Louie** And my name's not Postie.

**Sgt Mumford** No? What is it then?

**Louie** None of your business. Can I get through please?

**Sgt Mumford** Hey now, wait a minute.

**Louie** You are holding up His Majesty's post.

**Sgt Mumford** Well, ma'am, far be it from me to do any such thing.

**Louie** It's probably a serious criminal offence.

**Sgt Mumford** Holding up the post? It may well be – but tell me, do you have any more deliveries to make after this one?

**Louie** I'll say! You're just the first – there's a 20 mile round to do before I get back to the post office.

**Sgt Mumford** In that case I'd better help you.

**Louie** You can't do that! You're supposed to stay here in the camp.

**Sgt Mumford** That's not the sort of help I meant.

**Louie** Can I get past please!

**Sgt Mumford** Sure, but you won't get far.

**Louie** I don't know what you're talking about! Please let me ...

**Sgt Mumford** I'm talking about your bicycle – it has a flat tyre!

### Scene 3

#### In Liphook Post Office, later that morning

*John Thompson is talking to eight year-old Joe Leggett*

**John** Now then, young master Leggett, what have you come in for today, eh?

**Joe** Just a penny' th of gob-stoppers, please Mr Thompson.

**John** A penny' th of gob-stoppers? *(Starts to get the sweets out)* A penny' th of gob-stoppers. Do you know how much training it takes to be a postmaster these days, master Leggett?

**Joe** No, sir.

**John** No? Well I'll tell you. It takes many years of hard and dedicated work – several examinations to be passed, interviews to be attended, rules and regulations of His Majesty's postal service to be learnt by rote and thoroughly applied, staff to be managed, the latest telegraphic equipment to be installed and understood – and what do you come in here and ask me for? A penny' th of gob-stoppers!

**Joe** Sorry, Mr Thompson.

**John** Well that's how it is. We must all learn to do each other's work at a time of national crisis – if my shop assistant goes off doing a postman's round because the postman is fighting for King and Country in Flanders, then I must learn to be the shop assistant. *(He hands the sweets to Joe)* One penny, if you please.

**Joe** Thank you. *(Hands the penny over)*

**John** And thank you. Shall we be seeing you again tomorrow?

**Joe** I don't think so – my pocket money's all gone now.

**John** Then next week perhaps. Those should keep you going for a few days at least.

**Joe** Goodbye, Mr Thompson. *(He exits to the street)*

**John** Goodbye for now. *(Checking his pocket watch)* Now where's that wretched girl got to? She should have been back an hour ago.

*Flora enters from the house*

**Flora** No sign of Louie yet?

**John** Always late. Don't know what she does with her time out there.

**Flora** She's young.

**John** That's no excuse – she's taken on a responsible position – we must be able to rely on her. We're short-handed enough as it is.

**Flora** Yes, John.

**John** No good you "yes John"-ing me like that. You know I'm right.

**Flora** Yes, J ... . Would you like me to start sorting the afternoon deliveries?

**John** I mean you – you're not even officially on the staff, yet you work harder than the rest of them put together.

**Flora** Well I have had a little more experience in post offices than some of them. The work comes naturally to me.

**John** Living next door to the job – never get away from it, that's the trouble. When this war's over we'll get a little cottage the other end of the village. Then you can be a housewife, not a post office clerk.

**Flora** I'm not sure which is worse.

**John** What's that?

**Flora** I'll get on with the sorting.

**John** She'll come in with some cock-and-bull story, you wait and see. Got another puncture, or some such.

**Flora** It's a very old bike she's riding. Bought it from Jess West for thirty shillings when she joined us.

**John** Every postman, or postwoman, has to provide their own conveyance for deliveries – you know the rules – and a *dependable* conveyance.

**Flora** I'll go and give Harry a hand.

**John** And no talking in the sorting office.

**Flora** I know – that's the rules too.

*Flora starts to exit into the house, but stops as Louie enters in haste through the shop door*

**Louie** I'm sorry I'm late back – I had another ...

**John** Miss Woods – what do you think you are doing?

**Louie** It was that bicycle again. It just ...

**John** Where do you think you are?

**Louie** Why, what do you mean, Mr Thompson?

**John** Who do you think you are? Coming into the shop like this – like a member of the public.

**Louie** I'm sorry, Mr Thompson – but I was so late, and I saw you there as I passed by the window and I thought I'd ...

**John** You are not paid to think, Miss Woods. You are paid to obey the rules as laid down by His Majesty's Post Office. You will go out again and enter the premises by the rear entrance as the regulations require.

**Louie** Yes, Mr Thompson. Sorry, Mr Thompson.

**John** And when you have done that, and reported yourself present to Mr Baker, I shall wish to see you in my office.

**Louie** Yes, Mr Thompson.

**John** That is all, Miss Woods.

*Louie looks despairingly at Flora, then exits*

*(To Flora)* And it's no good you giving her sympathetic looks whenever I have to discipline her.

**Flora** She's only nineteen, John. Were you any better at that age?

**John** If I wasn't, my mother would soon let me know it – and not just with the sharp edge of her tongue either.

**Flora** Times are changing, John.

**John** Yes, and not for the better I think. Now, you were going to help with the sorting, were you not?

**Flora** (*Sighing*) Yes, John.

#### Scene 4

##### Lynchmere Common

*Bill & Maggie Tidy arrive home – he is a tinker and grinder*

**Bill** (*Entering*) Now then, Mrs Tidy, you'd best leave the donkey out there. There be no room for 'un in here.

**Maggie** (*Off*) I do know that, Bill Tidy – I weren't born yesterday you know.

**Bill** Well there's times when I do wonder. Where's me 'baccy?

**Maggie** (*Entering*) Where he always is, I 'spect.

*Bill searches his clothing and finds it – starts filling his pipe*

**Bill** You making tea?

**Maggie** Soon as I gets the fire going. Don't be so fretful.

**Bill** I'm not being fretful.

**Maggie** Ever since the author'ties came round.

**Bill** They can't do a thing. I've no time to waste worrying about they.

**Maggie** Stop being fretful then.

**Bill** They wants to turn us out, but they'll find they can't do it.

*Bill lights up his pipe*

We've got squatters' rights. Squatters' rights – you know what that means?

**Maggie** You'se going to tell me – again.

**Bill** Nearly forty years we've been here. (*Waving his pipe*) The King of England hisself couldn't turn us out now.

**Maggie** It's not the King of England as is trying to do it.

**Bill** Nor lords of the manor neither. T'would take more than a lord of the manor to shift such as we.

**Maggie** You hopes.

**Bill** I knows. It's the law of the land. Your magistrates and lords of the manor can't go against the law of the land. It's in violet.

**Maggie** It's in what?

**Bill** In violet.

**Maggie** What's that mean?

**Bill** Don't you know anything? That's the colour they write laws in – in the law books. A sort of deep purple ...

**Maggie** I knows what violet is. I just don't think you know what you're talking about sometimes. I'll go and make your tea.

**Bill** Donkey needs feeding.

**Maggie** So do I. The donkey can wait.

**Bill** He's had a hard pull today. Up to Hindhead and back.

**Maggie** If you got off and walked up the hills he wouldn't have to pull so hard. You and the grindstone.

**Bill** He'll be all right so long as he's fed. How much did us take today?

**Maggie** Before us stopped by at the last pub, you mean?

**Bill** A man needs his drink – grinding razors and scissors all day. And you were putting the gin away too.

**Maggie** I'm not going to sit outside in the cart a'waiting for you to come out, am I.

**Bill** Bit of drink does a wight no harm.

**Maggie** A bit of drink! The donkey stops by hisself every time he goes past a pub these days, to save you the trouble of doin' it.

**Bill** (*Going to exit*) I'll go and feed him if you're not.

**Maggie** Going to get rid of your beer more like. And take yerself well away from the doorpost a'fore you do it this time. (*To herself*) How much did us take! Some of us can't even hold what we do take.

## Scene 5

### In Flora's room, Liphook Post Office

*Flora is consoling Louie*

**Flora** Don't worry, Louie. I know you did your best.

**Louie** My bag was full. I'd only got to Conford. I'd another sixteen miles to go on my round - how could I have taken it?

**Flora** I sometimes think the people who make these regulations have never stepped foot outside London. Would you like a cup of coffee?

**Louie** (*Shyly*) Oh, no thank you - I don't ... (*Flora has not heard and carries on talking*)

**Flora** I remember once being carpeted for not delivering a telegram on time - we had a thunderstorm so violent it killed a cow in the next field, but that wasn't a good enough reason for the authorities. I had to write to them and say it would never happen again.

**Louie** I was very polite to the lady. I did try to explain I'd no room to take her parcel.

**Flora** I'm told she can be a difficult person at times. Here's your coffee.

**Louie** (*Accepting it with embarrassment*) Oh, thank you.

**Flora** You'll find Mr Thompson's love for the post office sometimes makes him apply the rules a little strictly. And as he had received an official complaint from the lady he felt he had to pass it on.

**Louie** (*Nods*)

**Flora** And he made you sign an apology.

**Louie** Yes.

**Flora** Well, that's an end to it then. Mr Thompson's not a man to bear grudges.

**Louie** I hope not.

**Flora** (*Changing the subject*) You've not been in my little room here before, have you?

**Louie** No. It's very - cosy.

**Flora** (*Laughs*) I'm not sure cosy is quite the word I'd use. A writing desk, two chairs, a waste paper basket and a potted plant. It's where I try to write - away from the family.

**Louie** Do you write a lot?

**Flora** Not as much as I'd like to. What with the children to look after and the post office work to do. I'll show you a few of my scraps.

*Flora goes to pick up some papers from the side. Louie has been nervously nursing her unwanted coffee, and takes this opportunity to pour it into the pot plant.*

These are some little poems - nothing very sophisticated, I'm afraid. Take a look and tell me what you think.

*She notices Louie's empty cup.*

Oh, you drank that quickly - would you like some more coffee?

**Louie** No! No, thank you. One's quite enough.

**Flora** (*Indicating the poems*) They're no great works of literature.

**Louie** I think it's very clever, writing anything like this. Oh look – there's one called 'Heather'.

**Flora** The purple moorland. It's the thing that first struck me about this area. So different from the cornfields where I grew up.

**Louie** It starts, (*she reads*) 'You talk of pale primroses, of frail and fragrant posies ...' I love primroses, don't you? – it means spring's really here when they come out.

**Flora** You notice things like that much more when you're out on the early rounds, don't you think? I miss it now, doing the sorting in the office.

**Louie** (*Reads on*) 'The cowslip and the cuckoo-flower that scent the spring-time lea. But give to me the heather, the honey-scented heather, the glowing gypsy heather – that's the flower for me!' Do you really prefer it here to where you were born?

**Flora** I sometimes miss all the old sights and smells I grew up with. Skylarks rising out of the fields right by my window, large flat fields stretching away to a distant line of trees, corn and oats sighing and rustling in the breeze, heavy earthy scents, not sharp like here ... . One day perhaps I'll try to write about those times too. At the moment it's just what I see and feel here in Hampshire.

**Louie** We're not such a bad lot.

**Flora** There I go again – I was thinking of places and you're bringing it back to people.

**Louie** Well yes – it's people that make places, isn't it?

**Flora** You're right. There was old Queenie with her bees and her lace making, for instance. I could write a fine story about her.

**Louie** And your family.

**Flora** Yes. Though I'm not sure I'd be very comfortable writing things that people could identify as being about themselves.

**Louie** You mean there were scandals?

**Flora** Not really – nothing compared to what I've seen and heard since. It's just (*shrugs*) I don't know – I'd be uncomfortable, that's all.

**Louie** Then give everybody false names, like they do in novels. 'To protect the innocent'.

**Flora** (*Laughing*) Louie Woods – I might just do that!

**Louie** I wish I could write.

**Flora** Anyone can write, if they want to.

**Louie** But how can you just shut yourself away in here and do it? Doesn't Mr Thompson mind?

**Flora** Oh, he thinks of it as a harmless distraction – a strange whim which his wife has – like my bringing wild flowers into the house and putting them in a vase on the supper table.

**Louie** (*Unsure*) I see.

**Flora** Mind you, he has his fishing. And how anyone can find pleasure in dragging a happy living thing from its cool, clear home with a hook has always been beyond me.

**Louie** Lots of us fish the ponds round here – seems natural. You should see the pike they get out sometimes. Big enough to feed a whole family for days.

**Flora** The most Mr Thompson seems to come back with is a couple of medium sized perch or tench. Anyway, you'd better be off now or you'll be in more trouble – and that would never do.

**Louie** No. Thank you for listening – it's made me feel a lot better.

**Flora** That's all right. I do know how it feels. Now be careful on your way home, won't you - and mind the soldiers.

**Louie** Don't worry, I will. See you tomorrow morning. *(Exits)*

**Flora** *(After her)* Bright and early. *(A pause, then to herself)* I do know how it feels. Now then, Flora - you're getting maudlin again, and that will never do.

## Scene 6

### On the road from Forest Mere

*John Thompson and Harry Envis are walking back after a day's fishing*

**Harry** Not a bad day's fishing, Mr Thompson.

**John** Not for you, Harry. Did you know that pike was in there?

**Harry** Oh, I've been after 'un for a while. But I reckon he's only a tiddler compared with some that's there. Not been cleaned out for some time, that pool. They grows to over twenty pound down there when they're not disturbed. Mind you, not much good for eating that size.

**John** What's that one then?

**Harry** 'Bit over two foot - seven pounds or so I should say - just right. We'll soak him in salt water twelve hours to get the mud out of him, then steam him and serve him with parsley sauce - he'll make a good dish.

**John** Enough for several of you there.

**Harry** Nearly got a second one too, but I couldn't strike at the right angle - hook slid out of his bony mouth. What did you get?

**John** Just a pair of medium sized perch. About a pound and a half each, I should think. They'll be nice split open and grilled.

**Harry** They will too. Mrs Thompson enjoys cooking, does she?

**John** She's a good cook.

**Harry** Oh ar.

**John** Her family always cooked for themselves. She learned from her mother.

**Harry** Difficult times these. A nice piece of fish'll make a change from the usual stodge.

**John** What else did you catch, besides the pike?

**Harry** Couple of perch worth keeping - like you. Arrived too late to get tench.

**John** Always fish the same swim, do you?

**Harry** Bait it up a few days in advance if I can - did you see my rabbit on the stick?

**John** Is that what it was?

**Harry** Old rabbit carcass crawling with maggots. Hang it over the water and let them drop in for a day or two. Brings the fish like nothing else. Trouble was that old pike kept everything else away today.

**John** You made him pay for it in the end.

**Harry** Wasn't sure I'd got a heavy enough line on him. Lucky he didn't get in among the roots or he'd have got clean away.

**John** What were you using on the hook?

**Harry** Red worms mostly, for the perch. Tried a bit of bread paste earlier, but it didn't seem to bring anything along. You never can tell. Today was a red worm day. How about you?

**John** Lobworm.

**Harry** Well, it caught you two for the kitchen. Can't complain I suppose.

**John** Might have hoped for a few more, or bigger.

**Harry** They're always there for another day, that's what I say. And there's nothing quite as peaceful as another day's fishing.

**John** That's true. When duty permits.

**Harry** Oh aye, Mr Thompson, oh aye – when duty permits.

## Scene 7

### In the Postmaster's House, soon after

*Flora enters, talking to Diana who is off-stage*

**Flora** Homework, Di! – if it's not done by the time you go to school tomorrow, it's you who'll have to explain to your schoolteacher, not me or your father. I'm going to try and get some writing done myself while the house is quiet – so you can do the same.

*There is a knock at the front door*

Lawk 'a' mussy-O, now who can that be at the door? (*Moving to answer it*) Folk always come when I'm about to start something. If it's one of your friends, Di, I'll tell them you're busy and ... (*She is now at the door and opens it – and is visibly surprised at who she finds there*) Oh! Dr Macfie.

**Macfie** Found you, in your new abode at last.

**Flora** You're the last person I expected see.

**Macfie** A pleasant surprise, I hope.

**Flora** Of course, as always. Won't you come in?

**Macfie** Thank you. I must say your streets are busier than I expected. Almost had to fight my way from the station.

**Flora** There are two camps here both sending men to the front today.

**Macfie** Poor devils. Straight from the prairies to the slaughterhouse. But what a topic of conversation to begin with – and when I have not seen you for so long. How are the children?

**Flora** Diana is in the other room, pretending to do her homework.

**Macfie** Still insisting she is not really called Winifred, I see.

**Flora** We're used to it now. She'll be 13 soon, and knows her own mind, that one.

**Macfie** And young Basil?

**Flora** He'll be seven in October. He's out with friends at the moment – I was just going to take advantage of the peace and quiet to do a little work.

**Macfie** And then I arrived – I am sorry!

**Flora** You are very welcome, as always. Can I get you some coffee? I have a pot freshly made.

*They move into Flora's room*

**Macfie** A cup of coffee would be much appreciated. So this is your writers nest?

**Flora** It serves as one.

**Macfie** Complete with potted plant, I see.

**Flora** (*Getting coffee*) Yes – but not in the best of health at the moment. Perhaps I've been overwatering it.

**Macfie** And this is where the world yields you the right to earn your scanty leisure.

**Flora** In return for the precious opportunity known as Life.

**Macfie** I remember you saying that in Bournemouth, the last time I visited you.

**Flora** I do feel a little guilty when my pen is idle.

**Macfie** We are all trying to produce something from within ourselves which will be immortal. Unrecognised perhaps, but nonetheless immortal. Wasn't Shakespeare alluding to that in his sonnet?

**Flora** "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

**Macfie** That's the one.

**Flora** But what with the long hours in the post office, and then the cooking and housework to do ...

**Macfie** You appreciate why I renounced any idea of a domestic life myself. I am free to take a few months here and a few months there to write out all the poetry and philosophy in me.

**Flora** I don't think that will ever be my destiny. By the end of the year I shall be forty ...

**Macfie** Forty, what is forty? I am nearly fifty – but if I could have just ten years left to write I should be content. Look forward! Look for the opportunity – it will come.

**Flora** I have written a few pieces – but nothing like your published odes.

**Macfie** Nor should they be. We must each go our own path. Classical odes are not your style.

**Flora** No. But then I'm not sure what is. I feel such gifts as I have are for poetry.

**Macfie** Well that may be so. You must let me see a collection of your work some time – perhaps I could help you find a publisher.

**Flora** 'Flora Thompson, the postmistress poet!' I think that unlikely somehow.

**Macfie** If you aim at nothing, you will surely hit nothing.

**Flora** That's true.

**Macfie** As true as I sit here.

**Flora** Perhaps, when my commitments are fewer ...

**Macfie** But you must make your writing a commitment.

**Flora** I get up before daybreak as it is!

**Macfie** Aye. I'm not saying it's easy.

**Flora** After this abysmal war is over let's hope we shall all have a little more freedom to do as we wish.

**Macfie** It can't go on for much longer. And the children are less of a tie than they were a few years back.

**Flora** That's starting to be true. Diana can be almost helpful at times.

**Macfie** And young Basil is not quite the handful he was, I'll be bound.

**Flora** I can see you've never had a family. He's a younger version of his father, and just as stubborn.

**Macfie** I see. And Mr Thompson is as implacable towards your writing as ever.

**Flora** John? He's not likely to change. Not unless I make some money from it – then perhaps he might begin to think it worthwhile.

**Macfie** Then let me help.

**Flora** Dear Ronald ...

**Macfie** I remember your parable to me about that parasite, the dodder – how it drags the heather down to the ground on the heaths around here. You told me – or rather, you implied – that while you were a heather person, your husband was like the dodder.

**Flora** Did I say that? It was just an idea I had for a novel. I don't suppose it will ever get written.

**Macfie** I think it was more than that.

**Flora** You should not read too much into a plot for a story. I'm sure that ...

**Macfie** We must somehow lift the dodder from you, and let you breathe again.

*John Thompson has arrived back from his fishing*

**John** (Off) Flora!

**Flora** I'm sure that won't be necessary. I am breathing quite healthily at the moment. (Calling to John) In here, John.

**Macfie** He is master of your house, but not of your talents.

*John Thompson enters, back from his fishing*

**John** Ah, Dr Macfie. Given us the benefit of one of your chance visits again I see.

**Macfie** I was in the area, Mr Thompson, just passing through.

**John** Good. You found us then.

**Flora** How was the fishing?

**John** Harry had more luck than I did. There's two perch in the kitchen though – better than nothing.

**Macfie** That's when the bravado of the fisherman's yarn meets the reality of the housewife's pan.

**John** Yes.

**Flora** I'll cook them for us tonight.

**John** Are you not staying for a meal, Dr Macfie?

**Macfie** No, no – I am a bird of passage, thank you Mr Thompson. Expected in London tonight.

**John** But doubtless we shall see you again.

**Macfie** When my itinerary permits. It is always a pleasure to talk for a while with a fellow lover of literature.

**John** The London trains leave at half past the hour, I believe. Now if you will excuse me, I am told I have to help our daughter on a point of mathematics. *(Exits)*

**Macfie** I didn't embarrass you I hope.

**Flora** The dodder cannot help being dodder – it was made that way.

**Macfie** Aye. *(Pause)* I think I should take the next train. Lord knows how long it will take to get to London tonight with all these troop movements going on. Shall I be welcome to call again?

**Flora** I have said, you are always welcome.

**Macfie** And you will send me some of your poetry to read.

**Flora** Now you do embarrass me!

**Macfie** Genius, my dear Mrs Thompson, very rarely recognises itself. And now I must leave you to cook your fresh perch, an occupation for which, unlike you, I'm sure I have absolutely no talent.

**Flora** There's a world of a difference though, my dear Dr Ronald Macfie, between talent and genius.

## Scene 8

### On the Road with Maggie Tidy

*Maggie is calling for business*

**Maggie** Any old razors or scissors to grind, Mr Tidy he's comin' be'ind!

*Joe Leggett enters*

Any old razors or scissors to grind, Mr Tidy he's comin' be'ind!

**Joe** I've got this old penknife needs sharpening.

**Maggie** Razors, scissors, scythes, and shears; billhooks and blades, swords and spears. Mr Tidy grinds 'em all, be they big or be they small.

**Joe** All I've got is this old knife.

**Maggie** Let's 'ave a look at 'ee then.

*Joe hands her his knife*

What's this? A winkle-picker?

**Joe** It's a good one – I got it for my birthday.

**Maggie** *(Holding it up)* Lor'. One good grind on Mr Tidy's wheel and it'd be gone.

**Joe** It's a bit blunt.

**Maggie** Blunt is it? So it is. Well, you'll just have to trust Mr Tidy to do a special gentle job on this. One slip and *(she sucks her teeth)*. 'Ave you never seen Mr Tidy working at 'is grinding wheel?

**Joe** Can't say I have.

**Maggie** You should see the sparks fly when he gets up a good speed on it. But he does do a good job. All the reg'lars says so. You take 'un along to 'im.

*Maggie indicates off-stage, and Joe exits*

*Sgt Mumford enters from the opposite direction*

**Sgt Mumford** Say, are you the wife of this Bill Tidy our Postie's been telling us about?

**Maggie** Depends on what your Postie's been saying.

**Sgt Mumford** Oh, she's been saying that this Bill Tidy is the best knife grinder in the country. Puts an edge on a razor blade sharp enough to split a hair lengthways, she says.

**Maggie** She does? Well that's my Bill all right. Got an eye like an 'awk and an 'and as steady as the Buffs.

**Sgt Mumford** And she also said that you and Mr Tidy know more about the countryside round here than anyone else she could think of.

**Maggie** That's right. He can tell you about every bird, bush, tree and flower on the common, without a word of a lie. Knows when anything's goin' on that shouldn't be too - acts like he owns the place sometimes.

**Sgt Mumford** Well, I'm mighty proud to make your acquaintance.

**Maggie** Tell that to the magistrates then, that keep trying to move us off our land.

**Sgt Mumford** Move you? I thought you were part of the furnishings here.

**Maggie** Don't know about words like that. You're one of them Americans aren't you? Don't know about words like that.

**Sgt Mumford** I mean you've always been here.

**Maggie** Since Adam delved an' Eve span, as Mr Tidy 'ud say.

**Sgt Mumford** That's near enough always, I guess.

**Maggie** Oh, we can tell you a story or two about this place, Mr Tidy and me, I can tell you.

**Sgt Mumford** I'll bet you can.

**Maggie** That chestnut tree in the village, f'r instance.

**Sgt Mumford** The one in the square, opposite the blacksmith's?

**Maggie** Aye. That's the famous one, y'know. In that song.

**Sgt Mumford** What, 'Under the spreading chestnut tree the village smithy stands'? That one?

**Maggie** That's 'im. That's 'im.

**Sgt Mumford** You don't say! Now that's really something. Wait till I tell the lads back at the camp.

**Maggie** Aye, you tell 'em. There's 'istory 'ere goes back a long way - further 'n where you comes from, I'll be bound.

**Sgt Mumford** Well, I don't rightly know ...

**Maggie** And rights too. We've got rights.

**Sgt Mumford** Oh yeah, I remember at school - the Magna Carta.

**Maggie** Carters, and knife grinders too. We've all got rights. Them's with money thinks different, but they'd better watch out.

**Sgt Mumford** Uh-huh.

**Maggie** You got anything for grindin'?

**Sgt Mumford** Er, not at this moment, ma'am. But I'll be sure to tell the camp barber. The way he draws blood right now, he could do with a good honing.  
**Maggie** Could 'ee? Pity - we only does grindin'.

### Scene 9

#### In Liphook Post Office, summer 1917

*Flora is just finishing the early morning sorting at 5.45am when Louie enters*

**Louie** Morning Mrs Thompson.

**Flora** Good morning, Louie. On time as usual.

**Louie** Quarter to six on the dot. I'm all right in the summer, even with this new Summer Time idea - it's the winters I find difficult.

**Flora** Don't I know it.

**Louie** At least you can see where you're going at this time of year.

**Flora** By the time you start, you can. Your round's stacked over there. And there was a letter for you - I've put it on top of the pile.

**Louie** Oh, let's see. I wonder who it's from?

**Flora** One of your soldier friends, I should think.

**Louie** Yes, but which one?

**Flora** (*Teasing*) Louie Woods, you're not two-timing those poor lads in the camp, are you?

**Louie** Nothing serious. They call me 'Postie'. It's all good-natured.

**Flora** Well don't open it now. 'Postie' had better pick up her bag and get ready for her round before Mr Thompson comes in - he won't be so good-natured if he finds her reading her private correspondence here.

**Louie** No. Hope the bicycle doesn't give up on me today.

**Flora** So do I. And no stopping for tea too long at Woodman's Green either.

**Louie** Oh, she's a lovely lady there. She invites me in the house to sit down, but I have to stay outside because of the rules.

**Flora** Quite right.

**Louie** And keep the post bag on my back.

**Flora** At all times.

**Louie** I think the rules were made thinking all postmen were Olympic athletes.

**Flora** Well I'm afraid Mr Thompson's not one to relax them. Listen, I think I hear him coming. Ready for inspection now?

**Louie** Just about.

**Flora** (*Checking*) Shoes and buttons polished? Jacket pressed? Boater straight? Badge on left lapel? Yes, you'll probably pass.

**Louie** I hope so.

*John enters*

**John** Right, Miss Woods. Ready for your round? Good, good. (*Starts to inspect her*) Let's see. Strand of hair loose there. And the badge could do with a bit more of a polish tomorrow. Yes. Other than that ... Got your bag? Good. Yes, that all seems satisfactory. Off you go then.

*Louie exits*

(*After her*) And don't be late back.

**Flora** And I must be off too, through to the house to get your breakfast and the children ready for school.

**John** All the deliveries sorted then?

**Flora** They are. We're clear to receive collections now.

**John** Right. And what are we eating this morning? Not stewed snails again I hope.

**Flora** I think not. I'd rather have no meat at all than try that again.

**John** Tasted like old rubber.

**Flora** I think the French must use a different variety. I'm afraid it's just bread and cheese this morning. And I even had to queue to get that, yesterday.

**John** No pickle?

**Flora** There's a bit of home-made pickle left. And I'll make you some tea.

**John** Good.

**Flora** And after that, if I can be spared, I should very much like to take a walk.

**John** You'll be back to sort the second delivery this afternoon?

**Flora** Of course.

**John** Very well then. Which direction will you be going in?

**Flora** I've a mind to revisit Grayshott. Strange how this promotion of yours should bring us back to within three miles of my old haunts.

**John** You'll take care going past the army camp.

**Flora** Yes. It's sad to think - in those days I was posting bulletins in the window to give news of a different war. We thought that one was terrible at the time, but now ...

**John** Flanders has all but wiped out the memory of Mafeking and the rest.

**Flora** And Edwin, poor Edwin ...

**John** A walk will do you good. But don't be late back.

**Flora** John, I am not Louie. I am your wife.

**John** And I am responsible for running this office, serving two busy army camps and a regular civilian population, short-handed. You know I push myself as hard as anyone else here.

**Flora** Yes John.

**John** And don't ...

**Flora** I've no complaint. You are as fair as you are strict. Everyone says so.

**John** Yes, well -

**Flora** And now I shall go and perform miracles with a lump of hard cheddar and a cottage loaf.

**John** And pickles.

**Flora** And pickles, and a pot of tea. (*Exits*)

**John** When will this wretched war end?

## Scene 10

### On Bramshott Common, later that day

*A British corporal is training Canadian troops*

**Corporal** Come on, look lively. Don't just stan' there - git fell in! You don't fink Fritz is goin' to let yer spend all day sortin' yerselves out do yer? 'E'd have mown down the lot of yer by now. 'Ere you - wassyer name?

**1st Canadian Soldier** Pardon me?

**Corporal** You'll pardon me before I've finished with yer. I said wassyer name?

**1st Canadian Soldier** *What* sort of name?

**Corporal** Wassyer name - yer bleedin' moniker. You 'ave bin given one 'aven't yer? They don't leave you in the middle of the bleedin' prairies to find yer own, do they?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** (*To first*) I think he wants to know your name, Jim.

**Corporal** Well done that man! Full marks fer understanding the King's bleedin' English.

**1st Canadian Soldier** Signaller Johnson. Sir.

**Corporal** Nah then, nah then, no need to overdo it. Corporal will do. Well then signaller Johnson, now we know 'oo you are, p'raps you'd like to tell us what it was we was practisin' doin' 'ere yesterday afternoon.

**1st Canadian Soldier** Use of the bayonet, I guess.

**Corporal** You guess? You'd better do a bleedin' sight better than guess when yer out there in Flanders, my son, or it'll be goodbye Johnson in bleedin' short order. This is a war you're goin' to, not a bleedin' invitation to dance. Do I make myself clear?

**1st Canadian Soldier** Perfectly clear, corporal.

**Corporal** Oh good. Well just don't yer forget it, any of yer. Now what was it I said you 'ave to fink when yer lunging at Fritz wiv yer bayonet?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** (*Trying on the accent*) Fink 'ee's yer muvver-in-law!

*Laughter from all the Canadians*

**Corporal** Oh we've a bleedin' linguist 'ere, 'aven't we. Well as it 'appens you're right fer once. And fer those of you 'oo 'aven't got muvver-in-laws, yer can fink 'ee's the sergeant-major instead. (*More laughter*) Now then, for today's training. Johnson - what do yer fink I'm 'olding 'ere in my 'and?

**1st Canadian Soldier** Looks like an old tin filled with nuts and bolts to me, corporal.

**Corporal** Does it indeed? Well let me tell you, this 'ere tin represents a Mills bomb.

You know what a Mills bomb is?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** You throw it. At the enemy.

**Corporal** You do, soldier - and as far away from you and yours as possible - because when it hits the ground, wallop! It is not a pretty sight if you're standin' too close.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** I'll bet.

**Corporal** And due to its tendency to cause mayhem and destruction, we are not going to practice wiv the real thing, but wiv this - which Signaller Johnson rightly identifies as an old jam tin filled wiv nuts and bolts ...

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Well done, Jim.

**1st Canadian Soldier** Comes from a wasted childhood, Len.

**Corporal** Which, as luck would 'ave it, is the approximate size and weight of the aforementioned Mills bomb. Any questions?-No?-Good. Right, now over there we 'ave Fritz dug into them foxholes - see 'em? - nah, not there - there! - and on the command, you will bowl your Mills bomb from 'ere into one of them 'oles. Is that crystal?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Er, *bowl* corporal? How's that again?

**1st Canadian Soldier** Sort of - throw it, you mean?

**Corporal** Gordon Bennett, 'ave I got to teach you colonials the rules of cricket too?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** I can sure pitch a good baseball.

**1st Canadian Soldier** Hit a fly on a wall at thirty yards.

**Corporal** Yer Fritz ain't no fly on the wall though, is 'ee - ee's a bleedin' Bosche buried in a bleedin' trench. You 'as ter lob yer grenade in an arc, so as it comes at 'im from above, see?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** I guess we don't play too much cricket in Manitoba.

**Corporal** Well it looks like I'm going ter 'ave to show you then, ain't I. Right, so over there is yer Bosche in a hole. (*They look where he points, somewhere conveniently off-stage.*) Now I takes my Mills bomb just so in my right 'and - pulls out the pin wiv me left 'and - and wiv an easy action, bowls it so it lands right on 'is middle stump - bang!

*The Corporal demonstrates his bowling technique, using the filled tin*

So – which of yer’s going to ‘ave a go first?

**1st Canadian Soldier** Say, that looked pretty easy.

**Corporal** All right then, demon bowler – let’s be ‘aving yer.

*He gives him a tin, and the soldier attempts to bowl – with less success*

**Corporal** Fritz’ll die bleedin’ laughing before you get ‘im, soldier.

*(To the 2nd soldier)* Let’s see if you can do any better ...

*The bowling lesson can continue for as long as the director of the play wishes, depending on cast, venue and audience. At the end, Flora appears from the general direction in which the ‘bombs’ are being thrown.*

**Corporal** ‘Old fire!

**2nd Canadian Soldier** You didn’t tell us Fritz was female, corporal.

**Corporal** Very funny. *(To Flora)* Oy, you! You’re on a firing range.

**Flora** Oh, I’m sorry.

**1st Canadian Soldier** It’s all right, ma’am, we’re only throwing jam tins today.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Tomorrow it’s the real thing.

**Corporal** Orl right, orl right. I’ll get the tins back so yer can ‘ave anuvver go – and in the meantime you two, escort this lady orf the range double quick. *(He walks off)*

**1st Canadian Soldier** Say, aren’t you the village postmistress? Bit off your route today.

**Flora** I was walking home from the ponds – must have been daydreaming.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Real nice countryside round here – I was writing home to the folks about it just the other day.

**Flora** Where’s home?

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Near Winnipeg.

**1st Canadian Soldier** D’you know Canada?

**Flora** No, I don’t. But my brother was there for a while.

**1st Canadian Soldier** He was? Whereabouts.

**Flora** In Ontario. Until the war started.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** He’s over here now, then?

**Flora** *(Quietly)* He was.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** You mean ... I’m sorry.

**Flora** That’s what I was daydreaming about. I’d just been to the place where I was working when he was away in the Boer war. He came back from that one.

**1st Canadian Soldier** Say, when we get over there we’ll give Fritz one for your brother.

**Flora** I hope the whole thing’s over before you have to.

*By this time they have moved away from the training area*

**2nd Canadian Soldier** Well I guess you can find your way home from here, ma’am. We’d better be getting back to our tin cans.

**Flora** Thank you. And I’m sorry I stopped your training.

**1st Canadian Soldier** The corporal may think differently, but for us it’s sure been a privilege to meet you.

**2nd Canadian Soldier** And remember us to ‘Postie’.

**Flora** I shall.

*The soldiers exit*

And to Edwin.

“For very deep my Love must sleep,

On that far Flemish plain,

If he does not know that the heath-bells blow

On the Hampshire hills again!”

*A Gypsy woman enters*

**Gypsy woman** Good day to you, miss.

**Flora** Oh – hello. You startled me.

**Gypsy woman** I could see that – you were in a world of your own.

**Flora** It's a lovely day.

**Gypsy woman** 'Tis for those as are up and about in it.

**Flora** Yes.

**Gypsy woman** My poor granddaughter's not though – she's out of sorts, and I'm looking for some wood-sage.

**Flora** Wood-sage?

**Gypsy woman** Good stiff dose of wood-sage tea'll soon set her right, see if it won't. Thought I remembered some growing in a clearing the other side of the ponds.

**Flora** Oh, there's a patch very much closer than that – just down there in fact – by the edge of those trees.

**Gypsy woman** You know your plants then, young lady.

**Flora** Not all of them, I'm afraid – but I try to look out for those I don't know, and read up about them when I get home.

**Gypsy woman** Not many people take an interest these days, that's the trouble. All the old knowledge – it'll die when the likes of me are gone.

**Flora** I hope not.

**Gypsy woman** You mark my words. All these doctors and their 'ospitals – be the death of it all. Death of us too, probably. Never get me into an 'ospital, never.

**Flora** You certainly don't look in need of ...

**Gypsy woman** Eighty-nine, me. There – would you believe that? Eighty-nine and all me own teeth. And I'll tell you what, there's not many my age these days as can say that.

**Flora** I'm sure you're right ...

**Gypsy woman** It's the food they eat today, you know – it's not natural. Not natural at all.

**Flora** No, I suppose not ...

**Gypsy woman** You've got children, haven't you.

**Flora** Why yes, I've got two. How did you know ...

**Gypsy woman** Yes, I can see it in your face. It's all writ in the face, what a person is. And if you know what a person is, you can tell pretty well how things'll go with them in the future.

**Flora** You're a fortune teller?

**Gypsy woman** I believe in trading favour for favour. You've shown me where the wood-sage grows – I can tell you that you're goin' to be loved.

**Flora** But I have a husband!

**Gypsy woman** Loved by a lot o' folk – by people all over.

**Flora** What do you mean?

**Gypsy woman** Strangers will become your friends.

**Flora** Strangers?

**Gypsy woman** Aye – strangers who'll never even meet you will know you and love you.

**Flora** But how?

**Gypsy woman** That's for you to work out, my dear. But there's some good news coming your way, that I can tell you. Now I must go and pick my herbs. (*Exits*)

**Flora** And I must be getting back too, or I'll be late for the afternoon delivery – and then where should we be?

## Scene 11

### Liphook Post Office, soon after

*Harry Envis and Louie enter*

**Louie** What was that the landlord said?

**Harry** Nothing I'd want to repeat in your tender ears, my dear.

**Louie** Oh, that's not fair. I'm in the 'Dragon' with you all every lunchtime – it's not as if I don't get to hear bad language.

**Harry** Who said it was bad language?

**Louie** Why was he whispering then?

**Harry** (*Teasing*) There's reasons for whispering other than bad language, you know.

**Louie** Harry Envis, are you going to tell me or not.

**Harry** That depends.

**Louie** On what.

**Harry** On whether I can trust you to keep a secret.

**Louie** Course I can. What was it?

**Harry** I don't know though. If I tell you, it'll likely be all over 'Tin Town' by first post tomorrow.

**Louie** Postgirl's honour.

**Harry** Is there honour among postgirls?

**Louie** You're not going to tell me, are you.

**Harry** Impatient, that's the trouble with you young girls today. I'm getting to it.

**Louie** Well let me know when you arrive.

**Harry** Hang on, that's Mr Thompson arriving. Look busy!

*Harry hangs up his coat and Louie finds some letters to sort. John Thompson enters.*

**John** No sign of Mrs Thompson?

**Harry** Not yet, Mr Thompson – but the main delivery hasn't come yet.

**John** I was expecting her back before this. Miss Woods, I hope you will tidy your hair again before you start your round.

**Louie** Yes, Mr Thompson.

**John** I'm not sure that I altogether approve of you spending your time in the 'Green Dragon'.

**Harry** We look after her, Mr Thompson.

**John** I'm glad to hear it, Harry. (*To Louie*) I assume your parents are aware that you take your lunchtimes in a public house.

**Louie** Yes, they are, Mr Thompson.

**John** Well, times have changed since I was a lad on the Isle of Wight. (*He exits*)

**Louie** We look after her!

**Harry** Well we do, don't we?

**Louie** Makes it sound like the east end of London, not a Hampshire village. And the pub's only next door.

**Harry** He told me once his parents were very strict with him.

**Louie** What's he like when you go fishing?

**Harry** We get on fine. He's quite a different character off-duty.

**Louie** Well I suppose Mrs Thompson must find something in him.

**Harry** Not too loud – he might hear you!

**Louie** Sometimes I think he leaves his office door open just so that he can listen to us.

**Harry** Better be careful what you say then.

**Louie** Look, there's a letter still here for Mrs Thompson - came in this morning's delivery. (*She examines it*)

**Harry** Here, you'll be trying to read it through the envelope next. Put it to one side.

**Louie** From London. From that Dr Macfie, I'd say.

**Harry** You're supposed to sort the post, not vet it.

**Louie** She sent him some of her poems to read. I wonder if this is him saying what he thinks of them.

**Harry** (*Again*) Put it to one side.

**Louie** She wants to be a writer.

**Harry** She is a writer.

**Louie** She's written a few short stories, she told me. Had them published in magazines.

**Harry** That's being a writer.

**Louie** Not a proper writer - at least she doesn't think so.

**Harry** It's more of one than I'll ever be.

**Louie** I wouldn't have the patience.

**Harry** I said you were impatient.

**Louie** Oh yes, and what was it you were trying not to tell me just now.

**Harry** Not that again.

**Louie** Yes that again.

**Harry** It's really nothing important.

**Louie** In that case it doesn't matter if I know.

**Harry** All he said was ...

**Louie** Well?

**Harry** He'd heard Mrs Vale say the postmaster's house always smelt of lino and bacon.

**Louie** Is that all ... ?

*At this moment Flora enters quickly*

**Flora** Sorry I'm a bit late. Has anything arrived yet?

**Louie** No, we're still waiting for it to cook - er, come.

**Flora** I wonder where it's got to?

**Harry** Probably shunted into a lino - I mean a siding.

**Flora** That won't make Mr Thompson any happier.

**Harry** He was just asking after you.

**Flora** Yes, thank you, I saw him as I came in.

**Louie** And there's a letter came for you this morning.

**Flora** (*Taking it*) For me? I wonder who ... ? No, I'd best open it later.

**Harry** If you don't mind me saying so, Mrs Thompson, you're looking a bit rushed off your feet today

**Flora** No more than the rest of us, Harry.

**Louie** You could read your letter while we're waiting. We'll keep a look-out.

**Flora** For the post?

**Harry** I think she meant for Mr Thompson!

**Flora** (*Laughing, opening the letter*) This is not a good example for the postmaster's wife to be setting. (*A pause while she reads*)

**Harry** Good news?

**Flora** The gypsy was right.

**Louie** Gypsy?

**Flora** Dr Macfie has found a publisher for my poetry.

**Louie** (*To Harry*) See? (*Harry makes a rude gesture back at her*)

**Flora** 'So we may now hope to see your collection of verses in print.'

**Harry** A famous author in the village.

**Flora** A small collection of verses published hardly makes me famous, Harry.

**Harry** It's a start though. Even the most famous had to start somewhere.

**Louie** Post's arriving! *(She exits)*

**Flora** *(To Harry)* So they did.

**Harry** Aye. Well, we'd better get back to work. *(Turning back as he goes)* You coming through to the sorting office, Mrs Thompson? *(He exits)*

**Flora** Yes, Harry, I'm coming. We mustn't let poetry get in the way of the post.

*Macfie enters*

**Macfie** You received my letter I see.

**Flora** Ronald! But ...

**Macfie** The postmistress poet.

**Flora** So soon. I didn't expect ...

**Macfie** I was passing. Is the time ... ?

**Flora** Inconvenient? A little, yes.

**Macfie** Then I shall not stay.

**Flora** I should like to have the time to thank you properly.

**Macfie** But poetry must not get in the way of the post - I heard you say it.

**Flora** That was ungrateful of me, after all you've done.

**Macfie** It was not meant for my ears. And you are right - I also have work which must be attended to.

**John** *(Off)* Flora, are you there?

**Macfie** And I see you have too.

**Flora** I'm sorry.

*John Thompson enters - he does not notice Macfie*

**John** There you are. The afternoon post ...

**Flora** ... will be delayed if I don't come and help. I know. I'm coming.

**John** Sometimes I think we live in different worlds, Flora, you and I. *(He exits)*

**Flora** If the world is in your imagination, then you may be right.

**Macfie** Imagination - aye, maybe it's all in the imagination. *(He exits, unseen by her)*

**Flora** I must go - you understand ... *(She sees Macfie has gone)* Dear Ronald.

## Scene 12

### On the Road with Bill & Maggie Tidy

*Maggie is calling for business again*

**Maggie** Any old razors or scissors to grind, Mr Tidy he's comin' be'ind!

*(To audience)* 'Ere, sir, you're not short of a few pence, are you? Only it's my Bill's birthday today and I've nothing for 'im. First time it's ever 'appened. Enough to buy 'im a screw of 'baccy for 'is birthday, 'ave you? You're a gentleman, sir. He's not 'imself without 'is 'baccy.

Madam, what lovely flowers you 'ave in your garden there. It's my man's birthday, you know, and 'ee do love flowers so. 'Ee'd be so pleased if I could take 'im just a few. No, those just there. You're very kind. Dahlias are they? My, what a lovely bunch - 'ee will love those.

Any old razors or scissors to grind, Mr Tidy he's comin' be'ind!

**Bill** *(Entering)* Where 'ave you got to, you old faggot.

**Maggie** Don't you 'old faggot' me, Bill Tidy. While you'se been kippin' in the undergrowth back there, I'se been a-carryin' on doin' business.

**Bill** Oh? And what sort o' business be that, then?

**Maggie** (*Shows him the flowers*) Look, what d'you think to them?  
**Bill** For me?  
**Maggie** For you? Lor, give me strength!  
**Bill** Only, I likes flowers.  
**Maggie** I knows you likes flowers. I told the lady you likes flowers.  
**Bill** And it's me birthday – you remembered!  
**Maggie** I did, but they're not for you.  
**Bill** But I likes 'em.  
**Maggie** You likes your beer too, and more than we can afford – that's your trouble.  
 These are for 'er across the road.  
**Bill** Who's that then?  
**Maggie** You'll see. (*She mimes knocking at a door*) Good day ma'am – fresh flowers,  
 straight from the garden. Set your rooms off a treat, they will. Only thruppence a  
 bunch. You're very kind ma'am. Thank you.  
 (*She sells the flowers to a stooge*)  
**Bill** How much is that you've got?  
**Maggie** Never you mind. This 'ere money's mine. 'Bout all I do 'ave.  
**Bill** And on me birthday. Nothing for me?  
**Maggie** Depends.  
**Bill** What on?  
**Maggie** You.  
**Bill** Me what?  
**Maggie** You bein' a gentleman to me.  
**Bill** What's one of them?  
**Maggie** If you don't know by now, Bill Tidy, I'm not telling you.  
**Bill** We got enough for a drink? On me birthday?  
**Maggie** No thanks to you if we 'ave.  
**Bill** Only comes round once a year, me birthday.  
**Maggie** More's the pity – I'd be rid of you quicker if it came oftner.  
**Bill** All right then, you old faggot, you can make yer own way home.  
**Maggie** But I have got yer a screw of 'baccy.  
**Bill** 'Baccy. And I thought you'd forgot.  
**Maggie** Couldn't forget you if I tried, Mr Tidy, and that's the truth.

### Scene 13

#### Flora's room, Liphook Post Office, early 1918

*Flora is sitting writing – Louie enters*

**Louie** Sorry to disturb you, Mrs Thompson.  
**Flora** Oh – hello Louie. What is it.  
**Louie** I know you don't like being interrupted on your time off ...  
**Flora** It's all right – I can't seem to put two thoughts together today anyway.  
**Louie** You look a bit – pale. Are you feeling all right?  
**Flora** Yes, Louie, I'm fine thank you. We had some unexpected news yesterday, Mr  
 Thompson and I, that's all.  
**Louie** Only there's a lady and her daughter in the shop asking to see you.  
**Flora** For me?  
**Louie** She's talking to Mr Thompson. He said I'd better come and get you because  
 you don't like him coming in here.  
**Flora** (*Laughs*) He's afraid he wouldn't understand the things I write about.  
**Louie** Wouldn't he?

**Flora** Just my little joke, Louie – of course he would. Mr Thompson's been properly educated – not dragged up in the back of beyond like I was.

**Louie** (*Unsure how to take this*) Oh.

**Flora** Who is this lady?

**Louie** She's a Mrs Parkhurst – says she knows you from when you were here sixteen years ago.

**Flora** Mrs Parkhurst? My old landlady in Heatherley!

**Louie** Heatherley?

**Flora** My name for Grayshott. How nice of her. And with her daughter, you say? How old would her daughter be?

**Louie** Bit younger than me, I'd say.

**Flora** Younger than you – then it must be Elsie, the one who was born just before I left. What a coincidence she should turn up with her late-comer just now.

**Louie** Shall I ask then to come through?

**Flora** Please Louie.

*But Mrs Parkhurst bursts in without ceremony, with Elsie in tow, as Louie exits*

**Mrs Parkhurst** Flora, here you are!

**Flora** (*Rising, a little awkwardly*) Mrs Parkhurst – how nice to see you.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Oh, none of that 'Mrs Parkhurst' – I'm not your landlady now – call me Florrie – we're both mothers with families – grandmother myself several times over. But what do you think of my little Lammas lamb? D'you see any change in her?

**Flora** If I'd not been told, I wouldn't have recognised her.

**Mrs Parkhurst** (*Laughing*) I don't suppose you would either.

**Flora** (*To Elsie*) You were pink and screaming in a nappy last time I saw you. I left your mother's house almost before you had your eyes open.

**Elsie** I know – mum's told me all about you.

**Flora** Oh dear – that sounds ominous.

**Elsie** What a one you were for books, and for bringing in great bunches of wild flowers ...

**Mrs Parkhurst** And for running upstairs two at a time.

**Flora** I'm not sure I could do that now.

**Mrs Parkhurst** But you were always a great help to me – more help than all the male lodgers I'd had put together.

**Flora** And how is Mr Parkhurst?

**Mrs Parkhurst** Poor Mr Parkhurst, he passed away five years back, poor dear soul.

**Flora** Oh, I am sorry.

**Mrs Parkhurst** A truly Christian end, and so patient with it. But he loved Elsie – our daughter Elsie. The flower of the family, he called her. All the others have left home now, and I don't know what I'd do without her.

**Flora** I'm sure she's a great help.

**Mrs Parkhurst** She's the clever one of the family. She won a scholarship to secondary school. And tell Mrs Thompson what you're doing now Elsie.

**Elsie** I'm going to study book-keeping.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Book-keeping. She'll get good money in one of those hotels with that. She won't see her old mother want for anything, will you Elsie.

**Flora** You're looking very well, Mrs Parkhurst.

**Mrs Parkhurst** There you go, 'Mrs Parkhurst' again. D'you know, I feel younger now than I did when I had Elsie. Odd isn't it. Ever since the rest of the children left and gave me some time to myself. God has been kind to me though, Flora. Mr

Parkhurst left me a small pension, and I've been able to move into a better house – with two front rooms to let to summer visitors.

**Flora** That sounds nice.

**Mrs Parkhurst** But Elsie, bless her heart, she'll see that we don't have to let rooms for ever, won't you dear. She'll see her old mum into a comfortable retirement. You've two children, your husband was saying.

**Flora** Yes, fourteen and eight now.

**Mrs Parkhurst** There, just the two. You young people don't have the large families we did. There's sense in that I suppose – not so many mouths to feed. But, you know, I'd do it all again if I had my time over. And you never really know when you've had the last – you might have a little surprise bundle arrive yet, like I did!

**Flora** (*Hesitant*) Yes.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Don't tell me ... ! Not you too?

**Flora** (*Nodding*) A little surprise bundle. We heard yesterday.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Well, this is a day, to be sure. D'you hear that, Elsie? She'll be the pride of the family. Or he, of course. They say the unexpected ones are always the best.

**Flora** I hope so. With the war still on ...

**Mrs Parkhurst** Oh there'll be an end to this war before long – our children will see better times than we've had. This is the war to end all wars.

**Flora** I wish I could believe that.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Needed one like this to knock some sense into their heads.

**Flora** It cost my brother his life.

**Mrs Parkhurst** No! The one you were so glad to see come back from the other war? There's no justice in the world – I sometimes really do believe that. When's the little one due?

**Flora** In October, the same as Diana and Basil were.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Be all over bar the shouting by then. This 'tin town' or 'mudsplosh camp' or whatever it's called – here where all the Canadian troops are – that'll be cleared away and within a few years we'll have forgotten anything was ever there.

**Elsie** What will you call your baby, Mrs Thompson?

**Mrs Parkhurst** Good heavens Elsie, she's only just found out she's having it! You don't just come up with a name like that out of the blue.

**Flora** My husband will probably want to choose something with a political significance.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Whose side is he on?

**Flora** Oh the Liberals – that's one thing we have in common at least.

**Mrs Parkhurst** Well, it takes all sorts I suppose. Never talk politics or religion in polite company, they say.

**Flora** No. Will you stay for tea?

**Mrs Parkhurst** I wouldn't say no, would you, Elsie? She's so much to tell you about how she's getting on, our daughter Elsie, (*to Elsie*) haven't you dear.

You just can't stop her. Yes, a cup of tea would be very nice ... .

## Scene 14

### A street in Liphook, at the same time

*Sgt Mumford and Louie enter from opposite directions – she with her bicycle*

**Sgt Mumford** Hi, Postie.

**Louie** I didn't expect to see you here, not this time of day.

**Sgt Mumford** I was waiting for you – thought you'd be passing by about now.

**Louie** What's this then – hoping to mend my puncture again?  
**Sgt Mumford** Something like that.  
**Louie** All right today though – my tyres.  
**Sgt Mumford** You won't get into trouble then – being late back to the office I mean.  
**Louie** I know what you mean.  
**Sgt Mumford** I guess you do.  
**Louie** Did you let them down on purpose that first time?  
**Sgt Mumford** I did not.  
**Louie** Your first day in the country.  
**Sgt Mumford** And today's my last.  
**Louie** Your last?  
**Sgt Mumford** Our orders have come through. We're moving out tomorrow.  
**Louie** Oh.  
**Sgt Mumford** So it'll be goodbye Merrie England for a while, and goodbye Postie Woods.  
**Louie** Where are you ...  
**Sgt Mumford** No idea where – but they won't be sending us out there to play baseball.  
**Louie** You'll write, won't you.  
**Sgt Mumford** I'll write it – you deliver it.

### Scene 15

#### Flora's room, Liphook Post Office, at the same time

*Flora is still with Mrs Parkhurst and Elsie*

**Flora** It's been lovely seeing you again Mrs Parkhurst ...  
**Mrs Parkhurst** Florrie.  
**Flora** Florrie – and you too Elsie.  
**Mrs Parkhurst** She's a proper chatterbox this one. You've heard all about us and we've hardly had a word about you.  
**Flora** There's nothing much to tell really. Got married, two children, a third on the way ...  
**Mrs Parkhurst** (*Rising*) Well it's nice to know you're happy dear, after all this time. You must come over and see us.  
**Flora** Yes – I probably will – when the war's over, and after I've stopped changing nappies again ...  
**Mrs Parkhurst** They're worth it though – just look at Elsie – our daughter Elsie. I'll admit I was taken aback at the time, you remember don't you, but now I can truly say she was worth every minute of time and trouble I spent on her. (*To Elsie*) Every minute, weren't you dear.  
**Flora** I'm glad. Well, goodbye then – and goodbye Elsie.  
**Elsie** Goodbye Mrs Thompson. Glad to have met you.  
**Mrs Parkhurst** She is too – been talking about you ever since I found out you were living here. No need to see us out, dear – we can go back though the shop. See you before long I hope.

*Mrs Parkhurst and Elsie exit*

### Scene 16

#### Split scene: Flora and Louie

*Flora watches Mrs Parkhurst and Elsie go as Louie watches Sgt Mumford go*

**Flora** Before long. I thought I'd have some time to myself before long.

**Louie** Take care of yourself.

**Flora** Sorting, queuing, shopping, cooking, with a little sleeping and writing squeezed in between – and now come the autumn ...

**Louie** Write to me.

**Flora** Come the autumn, back to nappies and night feeds.

**Louie** Goodbye and good luck. Don't forget. See you in a few weeks when you come back.

**Flora** Goodbye famous village author – don't flinch – you'll have to wait a few more years yet.

*Music: 'Goodbye-ee'*

- INTERVAL -

### An Advertisement for Correspondence Courses, 1925

Can You Write? If so, do not bury your talent, but have it trained by means of one of our courses.

Short story writing. Complete course of Six Lessons, with revision of Pupil's own efforts and advice as to placing with Editors. Conducted by Flora Thompson, Author of 'Bog-Myrtle and Peat', 'The Peverel Papers,' etc, and Myldrede Humble-Smith, Honours English Language and Literature, Oxon, B.Litt, Durham.

Terms for the Full Course £1 10 6 (Instalments arranged if desired).

Those who do not aspire to write for the press should obtain particulars of our general culture course.

Poets are invited to join the Peverel Society.

All particulars may be obtained from Miss Flora Thompson, Ruskin House, Liphook, Hants.

*This scene could alternatively be achieved by displaying or handing out a copy of Flora's actual advertisement to the audience during the interval.*

### Scene 17

#### An open space near Liphook, summer 1926

*Bill & Maggie Tidy enter*

**Maggie** You can't stop 'ere, Bill Tidy. They'll move us on if we stops 'ere, you knows that.

**Bill** Let 'em. Here I stops and here I has me pipe and me dinner. Where's me 'baccy gone?

**Maggie** You stay then. I'm not waiting. We've had trouble enough with the author'ties, you knows that.

**Bill** What author'ties? We got rights – this 'ere's a public way. You can stay for two nights and a day without interference on a public way.

**Maggie** They'll still move us on.

**Bill** They can't. It's a law immemorial.

**Maggie** You using language again?

**Bill** Immemorial. That means carved out on stone, like in the Bible.

**Maggie** Where is it then, this stone?

**Bill** Oh I dunno. Up in Lunnun somewhere I shouldn't wonder. 'Swhere all them laws come from. Now are you gettin' me my dinner, Mrs Tidy, or ain't you?

**Maggie** Always fretful you are.

*Flora enters at a distance*

**Bill** Good cause to be. Oh lor, see who's spotted us now.

**Maggie** The police?

**Bill** Worse – the woman who asks all them questions. P'raps you're right about moving on.

**Maggie** She's all right, the postmistress.

**Bill** Dunno when she gets to do any postmistressing – spends all her time walking on the commons. *(To Flora)* Aft'noon ma'am.

**Flora** Good afternoon, Bill. I'm glad I found you.

**Bill** We was just on our way.

**Flora** I was hoping you could tell me what this plant is. It's new to me.

**Bill** Dinner time.

**Maggie** That's not the name of the plant – that's why we're on our way.

**Bill** No offence, ma'am. It be hawkweed, as you can see. But there be hundreds of hawkweeds. This 'yun – now he be a new one on me too.

**Maggie** Not often you hears Mr Tidy saying that – new one on him too.

**Bill** No, bain't neither. Where did yer find 'im then?

**Flora** On the down. Just behind that clump of ...

*Diana (22) enters in haste*

**Diana** Mother! Mother, found you – look what's come!

**Flora** Di, whatever's the matter?

**Diana** Look. From Australia. He's written.

**Flora** Really? Which one?

**Diana** Cecil! – but Basil sends his love too.

**Flora** Oh, good.

**Bill** Well, since you'se got company now, we'll be moving along. Good day to you ma'am. And to you miss.

**Maggie** Fancy that – a new one on Mr Tidy! *(They exit)*

**Diana** I thought he'd forgotten about me.

**Flora** Well, he's remembered enough to send a letter at least. How is he?

**Diana** Having a wonderful time, by the sound of it. *(Shows it to her)*

**Flora** Orange and lemon groves around the bungalow, pineapples and peaches as common as potatoes, banana plantations, hibiscus hedges ... Well don't look so glum then – you want him to be happy, don't you?

**Diana** I want him to be here.

**Flora** Well, dear, we can't always have what we want when we want it – you know that.

**Diana** Mother, Cecil and I are engaged!

**Flora** I know, I know ...

**Diana** And he's on the other side of the world. How would you like to be that far away from father and never see him for months – years perhaps?

**Flora** Oh, Di – what a question to ask!

*Offstage, a gramophone starts to play 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles'*

What on earth's that? Fancy bringing a gramophone out into the country!

**Diana** It's these Londoners – they come here for fresh air, and they can't stand the peace and quiet.

**Flora** What a din. Well each to his own, I suppose. What amuses me is watching them pick their way through all the brambles in their silk stockings and patent-leather shoes.

**Diana** Jealousy, mother!

**Flora** No such thing, Di. Can you imagine me wearing anything like that? Or you for that matter.

**Diana** (*Teasing*) Speak for yourself! I'm past the age of consent now – I might surprise you by wearing a pair of silk stockings yet.

**Flora** On your wages as a telephone operator?

**Diana** They're not so bad. Any news of that night-operator being appointed yet?

**Flora** Your father thinks the Post Office will agree to it soon.

**Diana** Not before time. Then we can start looking for that little cottage you've always wanted to buy.

**Flora** Once he stops having to cover for the night shift, yes.

**Diana** Poor mother – you're a proper 'postmaster's widow' ...

**Flora** Come on, Di – you know I don't mind it that much. It gives me time to write.

**Diana** The last thing you wrote was that new Guide Book for the village – you made such a good job of it, it's probably why we've got all these day-trippers here now.

**Flora** It's more likely due to the professors and politicians who used to live along the road. They made a far better job of advertising the countryside round here than I ever could.

**Diana** Including your friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

**Flora** Stop teasing me. He used to come and send telegrams from my post office, he and George Bernard Shaw, but I hardly spoke more than a dozen words to either of them.

**Diana** I can't believe it.

**Flora** Post office regulations, my girl – no fraternising with the customers. Anyway, I was too shy in those days. Not like you and your elder brother.

**Diana** Basil? He'd probably have asked for their autograph if he'd been around.

**Flora** Quite likely. (*A pause*) It's over four months now since they left.

**Diana** (*Fingering her engagement ring*) You don't need to remind me.

**Flora** And Basil not even sixteen yet. I just hope your Uncle Frank's keeping an eye on them. He was twenty-one when he emigrated there.

**Diana** Same age as Cecil. Do you think they'll ever come back?

**Flora** Have you ever known Basil stick at anything for longer than a year?

**Diana** I wasn't thinking of Basil so much. I was thinking of my fiancé.

**Flora** (*Non-committal*) Yes.

**Diana** I sometimes don't think you and father approve of him.

**Flora** Oh, Di. If only life were so straight forward.

**Diana** (*Determined to change the subject*) Let's hope the night-operator job gets approved – then you can concentrate your mind on moving. It'll be nice not having to live next to the job any more.

**Flora** I've heard there's a new house being built at Griggs Green.

**Diana** Right by your Peverel Down. Sounds ideal – how much is it?

**Flora** I've no idea. But I've asked your father to find out.

**Diana** Shall we walk over there now, and see what it looks like?

**Flora** Have you got time before your afternoon shift?

**Diana** I start again at four-thirty, so we should just about manage it – if we don't dawdle.

**Flora** You mean, if I don't stop to look at too many things on the way.

**Diana** Something like that.

## Scene 18

### In Liphook Post Office, a few days later

*John Thompson is talking to Joe Leggett, now eighteen*

**John** A penny' th of gob-stoppers is it, Joe Leggett?

**Joe** Beg pardon, Mr Thompson?

**John** I was just remembering back about ten years or so when I first met you.

**Joe** Oh, the gob-stoppers - yes.

**John** What can I do for you today?

**Joe** I'd like some money out of my savings, please.

**John** Withdrawal from Savings Account, eh? Right. Have you got your book?

**Joe** Yes - it's here. *(Hands it over)*

**John** I see - and this is your first withdrawal. How much would you like to take out?

**Joe** Two shillings.

**John** Two shillings. Thinking of buying the Crown Jewels?

**Joe** No, not quite.

**John** Well now, for withdrawals you have to fill in this form. *(Hands form to him)*  
There's a pen over there.

*Joe nods and takes the form to one side*

And remember to sign it at the bottom.

*Harry Envis enters behind the counter*

**Harry** Fishing tomorrow, Mr Thompson?

**John** I think so, Harry, yes.

**Harry** Should be a good day for tench if this weather holds. Nice warm, still weather - just what they like.

**John** Have to be an early start then.

**Harry** Want to be there at daybreak for the best chance.

**John** I'll have Flora pack me a lunch tonight.

**Harry** Bread paste on a No. 6 hook.

**John** Pardon? Oh, what you're using for bait. You think so?

**Harry** Aye - but I'll take my worms as well, just in case. See you down at the Mere then. *(Exits)*

*Joe approaches with his completed form*

**Joe** I've signed it.

**John** *(Takes the form)* Let me have a look. *(Sucks his teeth)* I'm sorry, Mr Leggett - you've filled in two shillings in words, but two pounds in figures. Look - d'you see? *(He shows him)* I'm afraid I'll have to get you to do another.

**Joe** Can't I just change it?

**John** Best do it properly *(Getting him a fresh form)* Oh, and just a minute - you've signed in the wrong place too - that's where I'm supposed to countersign it. Lucky I noticed, or you'd have had to fill in a third one.

**Joe** I see.

**John** Here, let me watch you.

**Joe** *(Filling it in)* So the two goes in that column.

**John** That's right. And your signature goes there.

**Joe** *(Handing it to him)* Is that all right?

**John** That's correct. And now I countersign it – and hand you back your book with your withdrawal marked on it – and finally, give you your two shillings.

**Joe** Thank you.

**John** So now you'll know how to do it next time. There's nothing to these things if you just take the time to read the forms.

**Joe** Yes I'm sure. Well, goodbye.

**John** Goodbye Mr Leggett.

*Joe exits*

Ten years ago it was gob-stoppers, now I'm spending my time issuing two-shilling savings withdrawals. Where have you gone wrong, John Thompson?

## Scene 19

### The garden of the Postmaster's House, a few weeks later

*Flora is trying her hand at water divining – Peter, age 8, enters*

**Peter** Mother! What are you doing?

**Flora** I'm trying my hand at water divining.

**Peter** What's that?

**Flora** An old way of finding water underground.

**Peter** I thought it came from a tap.

**Flora** When I was your age, Peter, there was none of this turning a tap indoors to get water – we had to go outside and get it from a well or a pump.

**Peter** How far away was that?

**Flora** It depended. Some lucky folk had one in their garden – others had to walk to the middle of the village. A water diviner could tell you where to dig your well.

**Peter** Sounds like magic. Can I try?

**Flora** (*Hands him the forked hazel rod*) Have a go – this is where the old well for the house used to be, so I thought I might find something here.

*Peter tries it for a while*

**Peter** What's it supposed to do?

**Flora** I'm told it should quiver if you walk over water.

**Peter** I can't feel anything.

**Flora** Nor could I – but I saw a man using one yesterday. He walked around for nearly an hour, then suddenly stopped and said, 'Just there, at the depth of seven feet, you will find!' – and I'm told when they dug, they hit a spring exactly where he'd said.

**Peter** Do they still dig wells then?

**Flora** Yes, where there's no mains water. We had no electricity or gas either when I was a girl.

**Peter** How did you see at night?

**Flora** Candles if you could afford them – most folk in the village used rush lights – I must have made thousands of them in my time. Rushes peeled and dipped in fat.

**Peter** Peeled?

**Flora** You had to leave a strip unpeeled to support the pith. Burned for about an hour if you made a good one.

**Peter** I bet they were smelly.

**Flora** We didn't really notice. Most people went to bed soon after nightfall and got up with the sun – that way we didn't have to worry so much about lighting.

**Peter** Would you like to live that way again?

**Flora** I really don't know. It seems long ago to me now, but there are plenty of people living around this village today who still have no gas, water or electricity.

Haven't you heard them say so at school?

**Peter** We don't talk about that sort of thing.

**Flora** Oh? What sort of thing do you talk about then?

**Peter** Cars and aeroplanes.

**Flora** You've never seen an aeroplane.

**Peter** There's pictures in the magazines. And my friend Charles knows somebody whose uncle owns a car.

**Flora** Does he now. He must have a lot of money.

**Peter** His uncle must.

**Flora** Personally, I enjoy going out on bus rides. It's cheaper and you don't have to learn how to drive.

**Peter** Be easy to drive a car.

**Flora** Well perhaps you're more mechanically minded than I am. I just like looking at the names on the front of the buses and imagining – Haslemere and Fernhurst; Milland and Forest Mere – good mouth-filling ready-made poetry, those names.

**Peter** Dad fishes at Forest Mere. D'you think he'll take me one day?

**Flora** You'd have to be up at crack of dawn, my lad, and keep quiet all day. I expect you'd be too much of a fidget for him.

**Peter** Not fair. How did he learn?

**Flora** Sea fishing off the Isle of Wight, I should think. It's a bit different.

*Diana bursts in*

**Diana** Has he agreed?

**Flora** I think so.

**Diana** You *think* so?

**Flora** Well, almost certainly. There are still a few I's to be dotted and T's to be crossed, but ...

**Diana** So we'll be moving!

**Flora** If it all goes through, yes.

**Peter** Moving where?

**Diana** Down to a cottage.

**Peter** Nobody told me.

**Flora** We didn't want you to be disappointed if it all fell through.

**Peter** What sort of cottage? How big is it?

**Flora** Three bedrooms, two downstairs living rooms, a bathroom, kitchen, scullery and pantry.

**Peter** Is it old?

**Diana** No – it's only just been built.

**Peter** We won't have to go and get water from a well then.

**Flora** Not from a well – we have to get it from a pump.

**Peter** Outside?

**Flora** Yes. Quite like old times.

**Peter** (*Disappointed*) Oh, mother!

**Diana** But it's right by a farm, Peter – you can look at the animals next door. And outside the back gate there's the whole of Peverel Down to wander over.

**Peter** Silly! It's Weavers Down – even I know that.

**Diana** Mother calls it Peverel.

**Peter** I've heard her. (*To Flora*) Why don't you call things by their proper names?

**Flora** There's no easy answer to that. Sometimes another name just feels right.

**Diana** Anyhow, the house is called Woolmer Gate – (to Peter) is that good enough for you?

**Flora** Right on the edge of an old royal hunting forest – where kings and queens have come for thousands of years to enjoy the open air.

**Diana** I've a feeling we'll hardly see mother at home once we move there – she'll be out walking every moment of the day.

**Flora** I think there'll be a few other things to occupy my time. The garden for instance. A garden is one person's full-time job, or should be.

**Peter** Are there trees to climb?

**Flora** And looking after a mischievous son will take time too.

**Diana** It'll be far more relaxing than being in the middle of the village though.

**Flora** I think so. I'm looking forward to it very much. I only hope your father is too!

## Scene 20

### Liphook Post Office, at the same time

*John Thompson serves Capt. Byfield*

**Capt. Byfield** Bit quieter for you now, eh Thompson? Remember tales of when you had the Canadian and British camps here during the war.

**John** That was a busy time and no mistake.

**Capt. Byfield** Short staffed and under pressure, I'll be bound. Wasn't around here at the time myself, of course.

**John** I'm sure it was the same everywhere. But we hardly knew whether to laugh or cry when the war stopped. The 'flu epidemic took up to ten lives a day here.

**Capt. Byfield** Worrying time.

**John** Worst of it was, my wife had just had a baby.

**Capt. Byfield** Young Peter – he seems to have come through well enough.

**John** Gave us some worrying nights though, I can tell you.

**Capt. Byfield** Now we just have to worry about General Strikes and the like.

**John** Well, hopefully that's over and done with now.

**Capt. Byfield** Will those letters get to London first thing tomorrow?

**John** They'll catch the last collection tonight, yes. That's fourpence ha'penny for the three please, Capt Byfield.

**Capt. Byfield** (*Handing over money*) Do you never feel yourself wanting to move on, Thompson, to something bigger and better than a sleepy Hampshire village?

**John** It's a pleasant part of the world. I confess I miss being near to the sea – I grew up by the coast, and we were at Bournemouth before, you know – but my wife seems to like it here.

**Capt. Byfield** And the rest of the family?

**John** My daughter's got herself engaged to a local boy.

**Capt. Byfield** You sound slightly disapproving.

**John** Do I? Girls these days will do much as they please, it seems.

**Capt. Byfield** So she's unlikely to want to move.

**John** We'll see. The boy in question's gone to Australia, with my elder son.

**Capt. Byfield** The land of opportunity.

**John** So they think.

**Capt. Byfield** Well, it's our gain if you stay on here. Don't know a better-run post office around these parts.

**John** Thank you. But we'll be here a while longer I imagine – I've just been persuaded to buy a new house at Griggs Green.

## Scene 21

### On Weavers Down soon after

*Flora is out walking. Suddenly Sam the shepherd appears.*

**Sam** Lost, are you?

**Flora** I beg your pardon?

**Sam** No, just lost in your thoughts by the looks o' it.

**Flora** I'm sorry.

**Sam** No need – there's no crime in thinking. 'Bout the only thing they can't stop us doin' these days. Goin' far?

**Flora** Just over Peverel.

**Sam** I see. Now I've only lived here all me life, but I've never heard of a place by that name.

**Flora** No, it's an expression we use in the family.

**Sam** Ah, family too. Look too young to have a family.

**Flora** Your eyes deceive you, I'm afraid.

**Sam** Nothing wrong with my eyes, young lady. Can't be a shepherd 'less you can spot yer critters when they're well away.

**Flora** Are there sheep here?

**Sam** What would a shepherd be a'doin' of with no sheep?

**Flora** I've no idea.

**Sam** The flock's all around you, look. Southdowns.

**Flora** I see.

**Sam** Best make the most of today though. Weather's on the turn.

**Flora** The forecast was good.

**Sam** I carries me weather glass about me. It's just here in my right shoulder blade. Let's you know when rain's around twenty-four hours beforehand.

**Flora** Then I must remember to put on something waterproof tomorrow.

**Sam** Aye, that's about the only good thing that be said of Rheumatics – you knows when to leave your topcoat at home and when to bring it along.

**Flora** I must get on. I'm keeping you from your flock.

**Sam** So you are – and I'm keeping you from your Peverel, wherever that may be. *(As she exits)* Remember your coat the 'morrow. *(To himself)* What's a young female critter with a family doing, walking out in all weathers? Don't seem natural somehow. Don't even let my sheep do that.

## Scene 22

### The Leggett's farm, Griggs Green, a few weeks later

*Joe Leggett is talking to his mother*

**Joe** They seem to have settled in all right next door.

**Mrs Leggett** The postmaster and his family? I hope you've not been going poking your nose in there, Joe Leggett.

**Joe** No – just looking as I go past.

**Mrs Leggett** She seems to be a 'lady', but her husband's no 'gentleman'.

**Joe** What do you mean?

**Mrs Leggett** Just my judgement.

**Joe** He's a bit of a stickler for the rules they say, but he's very fair.

**Mrs Leggett** That may well be.

**Joe** Have you spoken to them?

**Mrs Leggett** She came round to buy some milk and eggs from us yesterday. Just the usual talk about the weather from her. I've not spoken to him – not socially that is.

**Joe** Only in the post office.

**Mrs Leggett** And not too impressed with him there.

**Joe** I know how to fill the forms in now.

**Mrs Leggett** Yes, I'll wager you do, but what good's that to man or beast?

**Joe** Talking of beasts, I'd better be getting the herd down for milking.

**Mrs Leggett** I wonder what they think, with all the farm noise here in the early hours? I expect they thought it would be all peace and quiet.

**Joe** I reckon Mrs Thompson knows a bit about the countryside – I've seen her talking to old Sam the shepherd often enough.

**Mrs Leggett** Him and his imaginary flock of sheep. I wonder what stories he tells her.

**Joe** And the number of times she's caught me bird-nesting on her walks in the past.

**Mrs Leggett** Has she indeed? She won't have a very good opinion of you then.

**Joe** I don't think she recognises me from that long ago. Anyhow I was only looking – I didn't touch the eggs. *(He exits)*

**Mrs Leggett** *(After him)* Just as well. That reminds me. *(Calls)* Eileen, are you there? Fetch the eggs in from the hens would you please.

*Eileen enters – she is about 16 years old*

And when you've collected them, take half a dozen round next door – I promised Mrs Thompson she could have some more.

### Scene 23

#### In 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, soon after

*Diana returns from her shift at the post office telephone exchange*

**Flora** How was the post office today?

**Diana** It seems strange having to ask, after all that time living next door.

**Flora** Yes.

**Diana** You'll be glad to know the post office is fine, and I've handed the switchboard over to father for the night. It's a pity the new appointment still hasn't come through.

**Flora** He didn't know that when we agreed to buy the house.

**Diana** Just as well perhaps, or we might never have moved. I see you've made a start in the garden.

**Flora** Yes. I should have been organising my study, but it was too nice to stay indoors.

**Diana** Where's Peter?

**Flora** Out exploring. Watching the work next door on the farm I should think.

**Diana** Not disturbing them I hope.

**Flora** I told him to stay our side of the fence. Pop your head out would you Di, and tell him it's time to come in now.

**Diana** *(Looking off-stage)* No need – he's coming now, with the egg-girl.

**Flora** He's bound to have forgotten that he's got a lot of homework to do.

**Diana** I'm glad I'm past that stage now.

*Peter and Eileen enter – she is carrying eggs*

*(To Peter)* I was just about to call you in.

**Peter** This is Eileen from next door.

**Flora** Oh that is kind of you to bring them round – I could easily have collected them.

**Eileen** It's really no trouble. They're fresh collected. Still warm.

**Peter** I met her coming over.

**Diana** Yes, Peter, so we saw.

**Flora** *(To Eileen)* So they are. How much do I owe you?

**Eileen** That's ninepence, please.

**Flora** I'll just put these in the kitchen and get you some money. *(She exits)*

**Eileen** Settled in now, have you?

**Diana** It'll take a while longer before we feel we're really here.

**Eileen** You've not moved too far though.

**Diana** That's true. It's a short bike ride to work now instead of just walking through a connecting door.

**Peter** Where do your cows come from?

**Eileen** They graze up at the big farm on Weavers Down – we bring them down twice a day.

**Peter** Oh, up on Peverel.

**Eileen** Pardon?

**Diana** Just a family name. I'm afraid he'll be over and pestering you if you let him – he's fascinated by farms.

**Eileen** I'm sure mum and dad won't mind that.

**Diana** Don't let him get in your way though.

*Flora re-enters with money*

**Flora** Ninepence – thank you very much.

**Eileen** There'll be more tomorrow if you'd like to come to the door. We do butter too.

**Flora** Thank you – I shall.

**Peter** Can I have a ride up the hill on your mule and cart?

**Flora** Peter!

**Eileen** *(Laughing)* That's my brother Joe's department. You'd best ask him.

**Diana** I'm sure he will.

**Eileen** Well, I must be getting back. I've still got work to do in the dairy.

**Diana** It must be a long day, working on the farm.

**Eileen** It is. Still, mustn't grumble. It's a job, and they're hard enough to come by these days. Good night, Mrs Thompson.

**Flora** Good night, Eileen.

**Eileen** Good night, young Peter. See you again, I've no doubt.

*Eileen exits*

**Diana** Who'd have a younger brother!

**Flora** I think you've some homework to do, haven't you Peter?

**Peter** I've done most of it.

**Flora** Well I'll be along to check shortly. Off you go.

*Peter goes*

Now, Di, you and I can relax for a while and listen to the new wireless set.

**Diana** If we can tune it in properly this time.

**Flora** I'll go and make some coffee and leave that to you.

**Diana** It's not time for your Choral Evensong, is it?

**Flora** No, that's at four o'clock on Thursday afternoons. I'm hoping there's a play on, and we might get the weather forecast.

**Diana** Hasn't old Sam the shepherd told you that already?

**Flora** Yes, but it will be interesting to see if the wireless gets it right! *(Exits)*

## Scene 24

### In Liphook Post Office, early morning a few weeks later

*John Thompson has acted as night switchboard operator. Harry Ennis enters*

**John** Good morning Harry.

**Harry** Morning, Mr Thompson. Had a good night on the switchboard?

**John** No calls at all. I suppose that's a good night.

**Harry** Been reading the *Post Office Circular* I see, to keep you awake.

**John** Not the most riveting of magazines, but better than nothing.

**Harry** Well, we can take over now if you want to get home.

**John** Is the sorting office fully manned?

**Harry** Aye, everybody present and correct and at their posts.

**John** Right - I'll just have a quick check in there myself, then I'll be off.

**Harry** Fishing on Sunday? Thought we'd try Waggoners Wells.

**John** Yes, for a change - that should be very pleasant.

**Harry** Got the choice of ponds there.

**John** (*About to exit*) Will you be bringing your festering rabbit on a stick?

**Harry** No. I'll leave him dropping maggots into Forest Mere for next time.

**John** One of these days, Harry, I'll get back to doing some proper fishing - in the sea! (*He exits*)

**Harry** (*To himself*) Proper fishing! I don't know! (*Picks up the Post Office Circular*) Not my taste in reading either. Hallo, what's this he's marked here? 'Applications sought for position of Postmaster in Dartmouth.' Well that's certainly near the sea. Ha - I wonder, could we be losing our Mr Thompson soon?

## Scene 25

### On Weavers Down, early spring 1927

*Flora out walking carrying her camera, and observing nature as she goes.  
She walks by old Sam the shepherd without noticing him.*

**Sam** There you are, scurrying by again.

**Flora** (*Startled*) Oh, Sam - I didn't see you.

**Sam** Never do. Nor anything else, I'll be bound. On one o' your Peverel walks again, are you?

**Flora** I was just admiring the view and trying to take some photographs. The South Downs are so clear today.

**Sam** Be a wet 'un afore long though.

**Flora** Surely not.

**Sam** When you can hear the trains rush out o' Buriton tunnel, you know it means a wet 'un's on the way.

**Flora** How did we manage before there were railways?

**Sam** You can smell rain and taste rain for hours before it begins. And that 'oss's tail over the trees - that means 'weather' too.

**Flora** Never mind - I like to be out in anything.

**Sam** Then you'se obviously not a shepherd. Wind and cold you can fight - 'tis rain and fog be the enemies. Damp, muggy weather's the death o' ewes and lambs.

**Flora** Well, I'm dressed warmly enough for all weathers.

**Sam** Make sure you keeps your feet dry though - that's the danger - wet feet.

**Flora** I'll remember it. You're still carrying on, then?

**Sam** I've been 'carrying on' ever since my old father died forty years since. The farmer were always going to hire a new shepherd at the Heath Fair each year, but he never did. 'Spose I must be doin' the job all right by now.

**Flora** I'm sure you are.

**Sam** Each year writes one more wrinkle on the shepherd's brow. (*Pause – Flora turns to go*) Now don't you rush away again 'afore I show you this.

**Flora** What is it?

**Sam** Over here, under the hedge – look.

**Flora** A primrose.

**Sam** Aye, a primrose.

**Flora** It's a bit thin and straggly though – too early really, I suppose.

**Sam** (*Disappointed*) Too early?

**Flora** (*Quickly*) But wonderful for the time of year.

**Sam** 'Tis but a primrose to you, a sight you'll see a many more times if you're spared as long as is natural. But when you're gettin' on in years like me, each time you see the like you know it might be your last, and you seems to set a value on it somehow.

**Flora** I think it's beautiful, Sam. Truly.

**Sam** Something more than a common flower – but there, I can't really explain it.

**Flora** You've explained it to me.

**Sam** 'Tis like, during the war when they ordered all them black-outs at night. I remember looking up at the full moon and the stars then and saying to myself: 'They can't put that out, nor the sun, nor the stars, for all their mightiness.' At bottom, it's the way the Lord intended.

**Flora** I'm sure that's right.

**Sam** Now, I must get back to my flock, and you must hurry on wherever you're a'going.

**Flora** Before I get my feet wet.

**Sam** Aye – 'tis no good female critters getting their feet wet, believe me.

**Flora** Thank you, Sam – I'll remember that. (*Exits*)

**Sam** Just a primrose. A poor, leggy primrose.

## Scene 26

### The Telephone Exchange, Liphook Post Office

*Diana is showing Eileen how to be an operator*

**Eileen** I'm so grateful to you and your mother, Di, for getting me this job.

**Diana** You can thank father for appointing you.

**Eileen** I don't think I'd have been his first choice! I imagine your mother pulled a few strings.

**Diana** I think she usually gets her way with father – even if he doesn't like to admit it.

**Eileen** It's a better future for me, being a telephone operator rather than a dairymaid.

**Diana** I think so. Look – there's a call coming in now – will you take it?

**Eileen** Right. (*Plugging in*) Number please. (*Pause*) Yes I *am* new here – oh, hello Mrs Moss, it's Eileen Leggett – thank you, yes very much – the Green Dragon? I'll try to connect you. (*To Diana*) It's Mrs Moss.

**Diana** The Green Dragon's engaged at the moment.

**Eileen** Is it? (*Checks her board*) Oh yes. I'm sorry Mrs Moss, they're engaged at the moment. Shall I ring you back when they're free? Right-o – goodbye. (*Unplugs*)

**Diana** Well done – you'll make supervisor grade yet.

**Eileen** Do you often have chats like that with the subscribers?

**Diana** There are only about a hundred in the village – we get to know them quite well.

**Eileen** Yes, I should think so.

**Diana** Look – the Green Dragon’s free now – you’d better ring Mrs Moss back.

**Eileen** Where? Oh yes, I see. (*Plugging in again*) Hello, Mrs Moss – the Dragon’s free now – I’m ringing for you. That’s all right, goodbye. (*Unplugs*)

**Diana** There, you’re getting the hang of it.

**Eileen** What else do I need to know?

**Diana** You’re helping me with the morning shift at first, working nine till twelve-thirty. Then if things go well you’ll be given a full-time job later.

**Eileen** I think I’ll enjoy it. (*Pause*) Have you heard from your brother in Australia lately?

**Diana** (*Off hand*) Not lately – nor from Cecil.

**Eileen** I’m sorry.

**Diana** (*Fingering her engagement ring*) I’m sure they’ll write if there’s anything worthwhile to say.

**Eileen** Yes.

**Diana** Meanwhile I keep myself busy and try not to think about it too much.

## Scene 27

### At ‘Woolmer Gate’, Griggs Green, soon after

*John and Flora are gardening*

**Flora** Those dahlias should be a mass of colour in the summer.

**John** Yes.

**Flora** And I thought we might try some delphiniums over there.

**John** Uh-huh.

**Flora** With the marigolds and nasturtiums – they’ll make a splash of gold along the border.

**John** Yes, that’ll be very nice.

**Flora** You don’t sound very enthusiastic.

**John** Sorry. No, they’ll be lovely.

**Flora** Your mind’s not on gardening today is it, I can see that.

**John** I’m not sure we should overdo the planting this year.

**Flora** I want to get things sorted out. If we wait till next year we may never do it.

**John** No.

**Flora** So why don’t we dig another bed along here. John, are you listening?

**John** You’re right – my mind’s not on gardening.

**Flora** What, then?

**John** I’ve – applied for another job.

**Flora** I beg your pardon?

**John** Applied for another job.

**Flora** You mean – away from Liphook?

**John** In Devon – Dartmouth.

**Flora** You let us move here, then applied for another job?

**John** I’d been thinking about it for some time. It means promotion.

**Flora** John, you’re 53 years old – you’ve only seven more years to go before compulsory retirement.

**John** Postmaster of a sizeable town – it’s always been my ambition.

**Flora** And it’s by the sea. You say you’ve *applied* for the job.

**John** I applied a while back – today I heard I’d been accepted.

**Flora** Accepted. And as a dutiful wife, I am expected to follow you with the family.

**John** But you can write anywhere. And you do all your correspondence by post now anyway.

**Flora** And much of my correspondence is about the joys of living in Hampshire.

**John** Well, now it can be about the joys of living in Devon.

**Flora** And the children?

**John** The children? With this so-called fiancé of Diana's in Australia with Basil, and not likely to come back, I should think she'd be glad to get away from the place. And Peter's too young to worry.

**Flora** I see.

**John** Gives that Dr Macfie a longer journey if he still wants to find you, I'm afraid. Haven't seen him for a while anyway.

**Flora** Perhaps he wasn't sure of his welcome.

**John** Perhaps he wasn't. Anyway, I'm sorry about the house.

**Flora** Thank you.

**John** I wasn't sure about the promotion, not until after we'd moved.

**Flora** No need to explain. I think I'll go and make the tea.

**John** Shall I finish the border.

**Flora** (*Exiting alone*) There doesn't seem to be much point now, does there.

## Scene 28

### Lynchmere Common

*Bill & Maggie Tidy enter arguing*

**Maggie** That's it then – if I had anywhere to go now I'd leave yer.

**Bill** Leave me? Huh! I'd be so lucky.

**Maggie** I dunno who's the biggest fool, Bill Tidy – you or the donkey. Least the donkey was sober last night.

**Bill** You'd had a few glasses yerself as well.

**Maggie** But I didn't try to light me pipe then, did I? And I didn't flick me match-head into the tinder and see the 'ole lot go up in flames.

**Bill** You were right next to it though – if you been in yer senses you'd have put it out.

**Maggie** That's right, blame me.

**Bill** Stands to reason. You were the nearest.

**Maggie** Nearly set me on fire, you did, never mind the tent and everything else. All gone.

**Bill** Still got the cart.

**Maggie** Only 'cause the wind wasn't blowing that way. Nearly 'ad the donkey too.

**Bill** Always complaining, you are.

**Maggie** Complaining?

**Bill** Yes you are.

**Maggie** There's you saying "the King of England hisself couldn't turn us out, 'cause we've been here forty years" – and what happens? You burn us out in a single night.

**Bill** We can set up again. Just across the road there's some big hollies we can use. Bit of canvas hung up there and we'll be good as we were before.

**Maggie** With our beds and blankets in a big black smouldering heap over there? You may be lying on bare earth tonight, Bill Tidy, but I'm not.

**Bill** Where you plannin' on goin' then?

**Maggie** I don't rightly know yet – but I'll find somewhere, you see if I don't.

**Bill** Who's goin' to take a tinker's wife in?

**Maggie** I got friends - don't you go thinking I haven't.

**Bill** I can't think of any.

**Maggie** While you're sitting on your cart grinding away, I has a good old chat with all sorts. They all knows me.

**Bill** They wouldn't give you the time of day.

**Maggie** They all says, "Hallo Mrs Tidy, how are you today."

**Bill** If you was to ask them fer a bed fer the night, they'd run a mile.

**Maggie** There's my sister.

**Bill** Your sister's two days walk from here - thank God.

**Maggie** I'm not asking you to come.

**Bill** Wild horses wouldn't drag me.

**Maggie** So what are you goin' ter do then?

**Bill** I said. Scrap of canvas, an' I'll be right as rain.

**Maggie** You'd not look after yerself proper.

**Bill** Who says?

**Maggie** I knows you. After forty years I ought ter.

**Bill** Never had a chance to try.

**Maggie** Just as well, if you ask me.

**Bill** I wasn't asking yer.

**Maggie** No, but I knows all the same. They'd pick you up dead of starvation 'fore a week was up.

**Bill** Folks can live on *nothing* for longer than that.

**Maggie** You'd live on beer and nothing else.

**Bill** That's living then, ain't it? Darned if I know what you'se werritin' about, woman. Same as usual.

**Maggie** No, you always was higorant. Ever since I known you you'se been higorant. Don't know what I ever saw in you.

**Bill** So you're off then.

**Maggie** I will be.

**Bill** Taking anything?

**Maggie** There's nothing to take, Bill Tidy!

**Bill** 'Cept the donkey and cart. And the grindstone.

**Maggie** What would I do with the grindstone?

*(Pause)* We'd better get that canvas up then - looks like rain.

**Bill** Aye.

**Maggie** And some of that bedding - it might still do if I give it a good shake.

**Bill** Reckon it might.

**Maggie** And I'll cut a bit of heather and bracken ter go under us for tonight.

**Bill** Nothing wrong with sleeping on heather - nature's own fragrant bed.

**Maggie** Well - so are you goin' ter help me or not?

**Bill** Decided to stay then, have yer?

**Maggie** I said, are you goin' ter help?

**Bill** Only - if you're staying, I wouldn't say 'no' to a nice mug of tea!

## Scene 29

### The Leggett's farm, Griggs Green, a few weeks later

*Joe Leggett is being watched by Peter*

**Peter** Are you off up to Peverel again, Mr Leggett?

**Joe** You and your Peverel! Just as far as the big farm, yes.

**Peter** Can I come with you?

**Joe** If your mother doesn't mind, you can.

**Peter** She won't mind. She says she can get on with her work better when I'm not around.

**Joe** I see. What work's that, then?

**Peter** Oh, in her study – she doesn't like being disturbed.

**Joe** Well you can help me hitch the mule to the cart in a minute, then we'll go and see if we can find anything interesting to look at up on the hill.

**Peter** Is he old, your mule?

**Joe** Older than you. He's a war veteran – saw action against the enemy, he did.

**Peter** Did he get a medal?

**Joe** No, I'm afraid not. I hear you might be moving home again.

**Peter** Father's got a new job in Devon – but mother's staying here until we sell this house.

**Joe** Could take some time to do that, these days.

**Peter** That's what she's hoping.

**Joe** Pardon?

**Peter** She doesn't want to leave – but don't tell anyone else – I'm not supposed to know.

**Joe** Oh, I won't tell a soul. You know who you remind me of?

**Peter** No – who?

**Joe** That 'Just William' – the one who's in the magazine now.

**Peter** He's scruffy!

**Joe** Well, your hair's not quite so untidy as his, it's true.

**Peter** And I don't get into trouble like he does – at least, not often.

**Joe** I'm sure you don't. Come on, let's be off up to your Peverel. We'll give your mother a few hours peace and quiet from you.

### Scene 30

#### Hewshott House, Liphook, summer 1927

*Capt. Byfield is making a presentation to John Thompson*

**Capt. Byfield** Well, Thompson, we're all sorry to see you leave, of course, after – what – eleven years among us now.

**John** Very kind of you to say so, Capt. Byfield.

**Capt. Byfield** You came during difficult times. It couldn't have been easy, but we all of us appreciate the efficient way in which you've run the post office here.

Always found you courteous, obliging and willing to help whenever possible.

**John** I've always tried to be so.

**Capt. Byfield** I hope you'll be happy in your new posting – I'm sure you will – and we wish you every success. But we could not let you go without giving you some memento of your time in Liphook. So it gives me great pleasure to present you with this cheque for £40 and also a list of those who subscribed to it. *(Applause)* I'm sure these names will – if you'll excuse the pun – ring a bell with you when you look at them in years to come. *(More applause)*

### Scene 31

#### At 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, some time later

*Flora is talking to Diana*

**Diana** It seems odd without father here. Don't you mind not having a man in the house?

**Flora** I don't really think we'll be attacked in our beds, do you?

**Diana** I suppose he was never at home much during the night anyway. On his camp bed at the telephone exchange mostly.

**Flora** Yes - well, he seems to be settling in at Dartmouth now, and looking forward to us joining him.

**Diana** No more news from Basil?

**Flora** I'd tell you if I had. It would be nice to have him home, and see this house before we have to leave it.

**Diana** Nothing from Cecil either.

**Flora** Try not to let it get you down.

**Diana** I do.

**Flora** I had the man from the estate agent round today. They've advertised the house at £750.

**Diana** Was he optimistic?

**Flora** Not very.

**Diana** You're glad to say!

**Flora** You can think that, Di, but you're not supposed to say it. I told him we'd accept no offers less than £725 rock bottom. I shall plant up the garden and it will be a blaze of colour next summer. If we have to go, we'll go in style.

**Diana** Never flinch!

**Flora** That's right. But I'm afraid it will mean no more 'Peverel Papers' when we move.

**Diana** You've written one a month for the last five years or more - I should think you'd have run out of things to say by now.

**Flora** Not while I live here - there's so much to see on my walks, and characters to talk to, and history to read about ...

**Diana** There must be all those things in Dartmouth too.

**Flora** Perhaps, but I feel it will be the end of an era when I leave Griggs Green.

**Diana** There's your novel.

**Flora** 'Gates of Eden'? Yes, I know - I've started it. Several times!

**Diana** But you've given it very little time while you've been here, what with Peverel this and Peverel that - not to mention ghost-writing for that big-game hunter for so long.

**Flora** He reminded me of the conversations I'd had with old Mr Foreshaw in Heatherley, when I was your age.

**Diana** And then there's running the postal writers circle with Myldrede Humble-Smith.

**Flora** I've always said I would settle down and write a long novel, one day. Perhaps when we've moved ...

**Diana** And meanwhile ...

**Flora** Meanwhile - I ought to be getting Peter's tea ready before he gets home from school. I've told you about the maternal instinct of the female ant, haven't I?

**Diana** She nips off her wings so she can't fly away from her motherly duties.

**Flora** Yes. I sometimes think it would make a good text for a modern novel. Possibly autobiographical.

**Diana** Did you have any boyfriends before father came along?

**Flora** Some playmates and companions. Nobody serious.

**Diana** Really?

**Flora** Well - there was Richard when I was in Heatherley. He once told me he could never marry me. I remember thinking: 'Good Heavens, surely you don't think I want you to!'

**Diana** Didn't you?

**Flora** I honestly don't know. I think it happened at the wrong time for both of us – the wrong time to make a decision like that. He was short of money and his sister was very ill. I was about to leave Heatherley and didn't know what I'd be doing in the future.

**Diana** What did you say to him?

**Flora** I told him he didn't want to marry anyone just yet, and that by the time he did he'd have probably made himself a fortune.

**Diana** Did he? Make a fortune.

**Flora** I've no idea – we lost touch. Richard Brownlow – I wonder what happened to him?

**Diana** I wonder if it's the right time for me?

**Flora** With Cecil?

**Diana** He thinks he needs to earn money too, before he's ready for me. But perhaps he doesn't really want to marry anybody.

**Flora** But you're engaged to him – it's different surely.

**Diana** Perhaps – but I think I know how you felt with Richard.

### Scene 32

#### At 'Woolmer Gate', Griggs Green, autumn 1928

*John Thompson has returned to supervise moving out.*

*Peter is helping him, carrying a small packing case clearly marked PLEASE KEEP DRY.*

**John** Peter, will you please be careful with that – it's breakable.

**Peter** It's very light.

**John** Well don't say I didn't warn you. Where are you taking it?

**Peter** Outside.

**John** Can't you read boy?

**Peter** Read what?

**John** (*Indicating the packing case*) On the side?

*Peter reads the message*

It's been bucketing with rain out there from first light – where were you thinking of putting it?

**Peter** Ready for the van men to pick it up.

**John** I'm paying the removal firm to move everything out of the house. I know you're trying to be helpful, but just leave it there for them will you? There's nowhere dry to put it outside at the moment. Lord, what a day to choose to move!

*Flora enters*

**Flora** When's the taxi due?

**John** Any time now. Are you all ready?

**Flora** As ready as we'll ever be.

**John** Peter, leave it I said! I'm beginning to wish we'd sent you on ahead with Basil.

**Peter** I'm only trying to ...

**John** Leave it!

**Flora** Let's hope the weather's better when we get to Dartmouth.

**John** Couldn't be much worse. Where's Diana?

**Flora** Just finishing her packing.

**John** She's been like a bear with a sore head these last few days.

**Flora** I think that's understandable, don't you?

**John** Never thought much of the fellow myself – she ought to be glad she's rid of him.

**Flora** I had a soft spot for Cecil. We all make mistakes you know.

**John** Don't know what you mean by that. Ah, here's the taxi now. Peter, go and tell your sister it's time to leave. *(Peter exits)*

**Flora** What a shame we have to see it for the last time looking like this. The lawn's a swamp and the flower borders are all bedraggled in the rain.

**John** Can't be helped. Now have you got what you're going to carry with you?

**Flora** Yes, but I'd just like to have a last look at Prince's grave before we go.

**John** We haven't time for that, woman! Besides, you'll get soaked.

**Flora** A soaking's nothing – clothes soon dry, but memories last somewhat longer.

**John** Right, the children are out there. Just pick up your things, Flora, and let's get in the taxi.

**Flora** Yes John.

**John** The sooner we're sitting in a warm, dry train, the happier I shall be. Goodbye Griggs Green. *(He exits)*

**Flora** Goodbye Peverel. *(She follows him)*

*Music, slide projection or newsreadings to point up elapsed time*

### Scene 33 – April 1937

*Richard Brownlow's retirement presentation*

**Chairman** Richard Brownlow, you have had a remarkable career of over 40 years with our company. Starting at the bottom rung, as a Probationer at Porthcurno, you quickly progressed in our Far East division serving in Madras, Singapore and Hong Kong among other places, before returning home to take up your senior post here at head office. And we must not forget your distinguished war record in the Royal Engineers, for which of course you gained your OBE.

Now, on the occasion of your retirement, it is my pleasant duty to present you with this gift from your colleagues. Not, I may add, the usual piece of domestic plateware or a timepiece, but knowing your love of old printed works they have chosen to add some of these to your collection.

*Applause as he hands over a portfolio of prints to Richard.*

We wish you a long and happy retirement in the peace and seclusion of the cottage which I understand you have bought for yourself overlooking a quiet valley near the coast.

*Light switches to Peter reading a magazine at home.*

**Peter** Here's what I was telling you about, mother. The picture of the new liner that's just been launched.

*Flora enters*

**Flora** You must get this love of boats from your father, not from me.

**Peter** I enjoy being an engineer – in Dartmouth that means working with boats. Are you going to have a look at this or not?

**Flora** Show me then. *(She looks, then stares)*

**Peter** No, not that page mother – this one.

**Flora** *(Reading)* 'Retirement from cable company of Richard Brownlow'!

**Peter** Who's he?

**Flora** 'Hopes to spend a well-earned retirement in his cottage on the coast.'

**Peter** An old flame of yours?

**Flora** And no mention of a Mrs Brownlow sharing it with him.

**Peter** One of your dark secrets, mother?

**Flora** No, Peter. No dark secret. One of the paths that might have been, I suppose. We all have those. (*Reflectively*) I had a brother who was heading for a new life in Canada, until fate cut him down in Belgium three years before you were born.

**Peter** Uncle Edwin.

**Flora** The uncle Edwin you never knew. The Mrs Brownlow I never was. I wonder if Richard would have been just another dodder person.

**Peter** Pardon?

**Flora** 'The dodder cannot help being dodder – it was made that way.'

**Peter** I think I'll stick to engineering – it seems more straightforward somehow.

**Flora** Perhaps. When I lived in Lark Rise, life seemed straightforward – or at least it had an established rhythm. But since the time I was your age ...

**Peter** Old people always think things were better in the old days.

**Flora** Not so much of the old! I may be nearly sixty, but there's a few years left in me yet.

**Peter** Then why don't you write about your times in Lark Rise? You're a writer.

**Flora** I'm still not sure your father believes that.

**Peter** But you are.

**Flora** I'd be trying to remember things as they were fifty years ago – in a hamlet on a gentle rise in the flat, wheat-growing north-east corner of Oxfordshire ...

**Peter** When times were so much better than today.

**Flora** Not always, and never for some. We've gained a lot since those days, but we've lost a great deal too. Were you reading that magazine for a reason?

**Peter** I'm revising for my apprenticeship exam.

**Flora** Then you'd better get back to it. I've got supper to make, and then perhaps I can get back to this writing which you say I'm always doing.

*Peter turns to do this*

But keep the article on Richard for me, will you?

### Scene 34 – May 1947

*John Thompson faces the audience*

**John** Was I the dodder in her life? If so, she found success despite me. How many of us make the perfect match anyway? I'll admit I was mindful of my work as postmaster, and as breadwinner. There's no wrong in that. To do a job well takes your full attention – and I either do a job well or not at all. There's no satisfaction in it otherwise, and we all look for satisfaction in our lives.

So, yes, it surprised me when she suddenly became a household name at the age of nearly 65. I was glad for her – and, I'll own, a little bit proud too. Then just as she was tasting success, young Peter went down in that Atlantic convoy. It was devastating – to both of us of course – but she'd also lost her brother in the other war. It was very hard for her then, but she persisted with her writing to the end, even though her health was going downhill. She finished the *Lark Rise* trilogy and finally completed *Still Glides the Stream*.

That was her swan song. On the 21st of May I'd been away all day on business. I came back in the evening and saw there was no meal on the table – feared the worst and rushed upstairs, but she was awake in bed – said she'd had one of her attacks at midday, but now she felt better. She asked me for a cup of tea – really quite cheerful she was – felt much better – so after a while I went downstairs again. I was only away from her for about an hour – then when I came back ... gone. I was stunned – I still feel quite ill about it.

We had her cremated and her ashes laid to rest at a spot she loved well.

The gypsy was right. She'll be loved by people she's never seen and never will see.  
And I shall miss her!

**- THE END -**

For further reading ...

***On the Trail of Flora Thompson* by John Owen Smith**

**ISBN 978-1-873855-24-9**

“This is a delightful book that goes behind the scenes, as it were, of the author of *Lark Rise to Candleford*. It is aptly sub-titled *Beyond Candleford Green*.”

—Graham Collyer, Editor *Surrey Advertiser*

“John Owen Smith, publisher as well as author, has done a marvellous research job in unveiling her life during these years; what makes his story all the more interesting is that he takes his readers with him through his exhaustive enquiries and interviews, so that at times it has the suspense of a who-dunnit.

“In addition, it is beautifully illustrated with old photographs and even suggested walks in Flora’s footsteps. A lovely book.”

—Colin Dunne, Editor *Downs Country*

***Heatherley* by Flora Thompson**

**ISBN 978-1-873855-29-4**

Her ‘lost’ sequel to *Lark Rise to Candleford*. That story ends with her leaving her native Oxfordshire in 1897 for pastures new. In *Heatherley* she picks up the story again when she takes her first permanent post in Grayshott, a village on the Hampshire/Surrey border.

Here she describes her surprise at entering a different world – a new settlement placed amid wild heather-clad hilltops compared with the old-established village set in the heavy, flat, agricultural landscape of her childhood.

For those who have been enchanted by her earlier work, the continuing story as ‘Laura goes farther’ will be compulsive reading.

***The Peverel Papers* by Flora Thompson**

**ISBN 978-1-873855-57-7**

Her nature notes written 1921–1927 while she was living in Liphook. Although published serially in *The Catholic Fireside* at the time, this is the first occasion on which they have been published together, complete and unabridged, in a single volume.

**For further information on Flora Thompson, see the website  
[www.johnowensmith.co.uk/flora/](http://www.johnowensmith.co.uk/flora/)**