

Flora's Peverel



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

John Owen Smith

Flora's Peverel

Typeset and published by John Owen Smith
19 Kay Crescent, Headley, Bordon, Hampshire GU35 8AH
Tel: (01428) 712892 – Fax: 08700 516554
E-mail: wordsmith@johnowensmith.co.uk
www.johnowensmith.co.uk/

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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
'Joe' Leggett (8 in 1916)
Bill Tidy - a tinker (say 60s)
Maggie Tidy, his wife (say 60s)
Dr Ronald Campbell Macfie (50)
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)
Mrs Vale & Bessie Vale
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 Bill & Maggie Tidy

Maggie is calling for business

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

Bessie Vale enters

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

Bessie 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.

Bessie All I've got is this old knife.

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

Bessie hands her his knife

What's this? A winkle-picker?

Bessie 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.

Bessie 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?

Bessie 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.

Mrs Vale enters

Mrs Vale Bessie Vale, you come here there this minute.

Bessie I'm getting my knife sharpened.

Mrs Vale You'll get a slap on the back side and all young miss. What do I keep telling you? You don't go dealing with the likes of them.

Bessie But it's

Mrs Vale There's a perfectly good ironmonger in the village if you want your knife seen to. And there's all these soldiers about too. You stay with me or I'll let you know what for.

Mrs Vale exits with Bessie

Maggie Suit yourself, madam. Just see how much Coyte's charges you. And it won't be as good a job as Mr Tidy 'ud make of it.

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

Bill & Maggie Tidy enter

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

Bill (*Entering*) What you keep hollerin' on about, woman? There's nobody here fer miles around.

Maggie Force a' habit. You never knows where you might find trade.

Bill Not in the middle of this 'ere common you won't.

Maggie Oh, and what about all they American soldiers in that camp over there. I don't suppose they does their own grinding, do they.

Bill They's Canadians – keep telling you yer higorant.

Maggie Americans, Canadians – what's the difference? They all has money.

Bill Anyway, they won't let us in – not the likes of us.

Maggie No but they comes out, don't they. Like that one the other day.

Bill That were in the village. This ain't the village, is it. This is bleedin' Bramshott Common. This is where they does all their exercisin' and things. Don't know why I let you bring me here.

Maggie I'll show you why I brings you 'ere, Bill Tidy. You look around you. What d'yer see?

Bill What d'yer mean, "what d'yer see?"

Maggie Have a good look. What d'yer see?

Bill It's no use you keep repeatin' yerself, woman – "What d'yer see? What d'yer see?" There's pine trees and birch trees and gorse and heather – and no trade as I can see.

Maggie Where them soldiers have been training, they've left stuff.

Bill Stuff? What stuff? Yer werritin' on again, ain't yer.

Maggie Stuff they've left be'ind. Stuff we can sell on.

Bill I can't see one single piece of stuff.

Maggie That's because you're not lookin' proper.

Bill Alright, you show me one piece of stuff on this common that's worth pickin' up – just show me.

Maggie I'll show you alright. Over here look. (*She goes over to the edge of the stage and picks up a Mills bomb*). Nice piece of metal there – be worth a bob or two. (*Hands it to Bill*)

Bill Blessed if I know what this is. (*He shakes it*) Heavy though. Fair bit of metal in this.

Maggie Maybe there's more.

Bill Could be our lucky day.

Maggie Put 'im on yer bag and see what we can get for 'im.

Bill Aye, there's old Eade could be interested in it.

Sgt Mumford enters

Mumford Hello there – good to see you again Mrs ... now wait a minute – what's that you're holding?

Maggie Just a piece of old scrap metal we picked up.

Mumford Scrap metal? You know what that is? That's a Mills bomb!

Bill Worth much, is it?

Mumford How much is your life worth? Now just hand it to me Mr Tidy, and very gently.

Bill gently hands him the bomb – Mumford inspects it gingerly

You're a lucky man – looks like this one's a dud.

Maggie So we can have it back then.

Mumford No way! I'll take it back to camp and get it checked out. Meantime I suggest you move away from here. The next one might be live. (*He exits with the bomb*)

Bill Can we have it back! You want to blow my head off then?

Maggie Didn't know, did I? Thought I were doin' you a favour.

Flora enters at a distance

Bill Me a favour? That'll be the day. Oh lor, see who's spotted us now.

Maggie The police?

Bill Worse – the woman who asks all them questions.

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. Bit off your route today. Dangerous place, this.

Flora I was walking home from the ponds – must have been daydreaming. Thinking about my brother.

Maggie Your brother?

Flora He was in the Canadian army, until... I've just been to visit the place where I was working when he was away in the Boer war. He came back from that one.

Maggie I'm sorry, dear.

Bill *(Embarrassed)* Yes, well – I think we'd better be on our way. See if we can find some proper trade.

Maggie *(To Flora)* See you in the village I expect.

Flora Yes. Goodbye.

Bill and Maggie exit

Oh 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 [Mrs Vale & Bessie?])

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, here she is again. *(To Flora)* Aft'noon again 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, Eileen Leggett?

Eileen Beg pardon, Mr Thompson?

John I was just remembering back about ten years or so when I first met your brother.

Eileen Oh – yes.

John He came in here and asked me for a penny'th of gob-stoppers. What can I do for you today?

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

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

Eileen Yes – it's here. (*Hands it over*)

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

Eileen Two shillings.

John Two shillings. Thinking of buying the Crown Jewels?

Eileen No, not quite.

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

Eileen 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*)

Eileen approaches with his completed form

Eileen I've signed it.

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

Eileen Can't I just change it?

John Best do it properly (*Getting her 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.

Eileen I see.

John Here, let me watch you.

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

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

Eileen (*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.

Eileen 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.

Eileen Yes I'm sure. Well, goodbye.

John Goodbye Miss Leggett.

Eileen 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 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 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 I caught it, and so did my two elder children. 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

Eileen Leggett is talking to her mother

Eileen 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, Eileen Leggett.

Eileen No – just looking as I go past.

Mrs Leggett She seems to be a 'lady', but her husband's no 'gentleman'.

Eileen What do you mean?

Mrs Leggett Just my judgement.

Eileen He's a bit of a stickler for the rules they say, but he's very fair.

Mrs Leggett That may well be.

Eileen 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.

Eileen Only in the post office.

Mrs Leggett And not too impressed with him there.

Eileen 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?

Eileen 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.

Eileen 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.

Eileen 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.

Eileen I don't think she recognises me from that long ago. Anyhow I was only looking – I didn't touch the eggs.

Mrs Leggett Just as well. That reminds me. Fetch the eggs in from the hens would you please. 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 Envois 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're 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

Eileen Leggett is being watched by Peter

Peter Are you off up to Peverel again, Miss Leggett?

Eileen You and your Peverel! Just as far as the big farm, yes.

Peter Can I come with you?

Eileen 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.

Eileen I see. What work's that, then?

Peter Oh, in her study - she doesn't like being disturbed.

Eileen 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?

Eileen Older than you. He's a war veteran - saw action against the enemy, he did.

Peter Did he get a medal?

Eileen 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.

Eileen Could take some time to do that, these days.

Peter That's what she's hoping.

Eileen Pardon?

Peter She doesn't want to leave - but don't tell anyone else - I'm not supposed to know.

Eileen Oh, I won't tell a soul. You know who you remind me of?

Peter No - who?

Eileen That 'Just William' - the one who's in the magazine now.

Peter He's scruffy!

Eileen 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.

Eileen 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 Diana reading a magazine at home.

Diana Here's what Peter was telling me about, mother. The picture of the new liner that's just been launched.

Flora enters

Flora He must get his love of boats from his father, not from me.

Diana He enjoys being an engineer – and in Dartmouth that means working with boats.

Flora Show me then. (*She looks, then stares*)

Diana No, not that page – this one.

Flora No this is more interesting. (*Reading*) ‘Retirement from cable company of Richard Brownlow’!

Diana Richard?

Flora ‘Hopes to spend a well-earned retirement in his cottage on the coast.’

Diana That old flame of yours?

Flora And no mention of a Mrs Brownlow sharing it with him.

Diana One of your dark secrets, mother?

Flora No, Diana. 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.

Diana Uncle Edwin.

Flora The uncle Edwin you never really knew. The Mrs Brownlow I never was. I wonder if Richard would have been just another dodder person.

Diana Pardon?

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

Diana I think I’ll stick to operating a switchboard – 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 then ...

Diana 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.

Diana 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.

Diana 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 ...

Diana 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. Was he reading that magazine for a reason?

Diana Revising for his apprenticeship exam, I think.

Flora Then you’d better give it back to him. I’ve got supper to make, and then perhaps I can get back to this writing which you say I’m always doing. But make sure he keeps 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 978-1-873855-75-1

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 Grayscott, 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.

**For further information on Flora Thompson, see the website
www.johnowensmith.co.uk/flora/**