

Extracts from the Readers' Union magazine

May, 1945

A Country Child Taking Notes

by Flora Thompson

The Author of the May 'Additional'

The additional (optional) book for May, to be published at 7s. (O.U.P. 15s.) on Saturday the 3rd, is 'Lark Rise to Candleford.' This 'country trilogy' is a chronicle of a bygone day and life that comes strangely close to one's heart; nearly six hundred pages written in a kindly, enchanting style from a memory richly full; there are many lovely wood engravings by Julie Neild. We are happy to be able to print these notes, specially written by Miss Thompson for the 'News,' as a sample of the flavour of the book, as background to a trilogy which has aroused great enthusiasm among many readers and has become a classic of its kind. Members without standing orders for RU's additional bargains who would like a copy should now order from Letchworth without delay, naming their supplier. Members overseas should apply to their usual agents (see p. 16).

THE REAL NAME OF THE HAMLET described as Lark Rise in the first book of this trilogy is Juniper Hill. It stood, and still stands with few outward changes, a small group of grey stone cottages on a gentle rise in the agricultural north-east corner of Oxfordshire. The countryside is described in *Lark Rise*: 'All around, from every quarter, the stiff clayey soil of the arable fields crept up; bare and brown and wind-swept for eight months out of the twelve. Spring brought a flush of green corn, and there were violets under the hedges and pussy-willow out by the brook at the bottom of the "Hundred Acres"; but only for a few weeks in later summer had the landscape real beauty. Then the ripened cornfields rippled up to the doorsteps of the cottages and the hamlet became an island in a sea of dark gold.'

So at least it appeared to the author, who was born, the daughter of a stonemason, in one of the oldest of the grey stone cottages, and spent the whole of her childhood in the hamlet. That was in the now far-away 1880s, before the motor-car or the films or the wireless had been invented, when the bicycle was a novelty, and the usual way of getting about was on foot, or in the carrier's cart. In those days such remote country places had little contact with the outside world. Each small community was self-contained and largely self-supporting. In the gardens and pigstyes attached to their cottages the inhabitants grew their own vegetables and bacon, they gathered sticks for their fires in the woods, and gleaned corn for their winter puddings and pies in the farmer's fields. And these exertions were necessary, for money was scarce. In the hamlet all but two or three of the men were farm-workers, and the agricultural wage at the time was but ten shillings a week. Life for them was a struggle, for large families abounded, eight to ten children was about the average.

But, though poor, the Lark Rise people were not in any sense depressed. They were free workers, not living in estate or 'tied' cottages. There was no resident parson or squire to oppress them, no superior family at all lived in the hamlet, all there were poor and all were equal. How they managed to live and keep healthy and even cheerful is told in *Lark Rise*.

A life without organized amusements, without motor-bus rides to cinemas, or dances, or Women's Institutes, or whist drives, or men's clubs, would be thought almost incredibly dull in these days. But even at Lark Rise they had their few pleasures. The high light of the year was the village feast, the only day in the year when people from the outlying villages streamed into the place; then the inn was full and merry, and all the children had pennies to spend at the

gingerbread stall. Other holidays were May Day, when the May garland was carried in procession, the Harvest Home, when all feasted at the farmer's expense, and Bonfire Night, when the lads and young men went round to the doors of the cottages, singing:

Remember, remember, the fifth of November,
The gunpowder treason and plot,
A stick and a stake for King James's sake,
Will you please to give us a faggot?

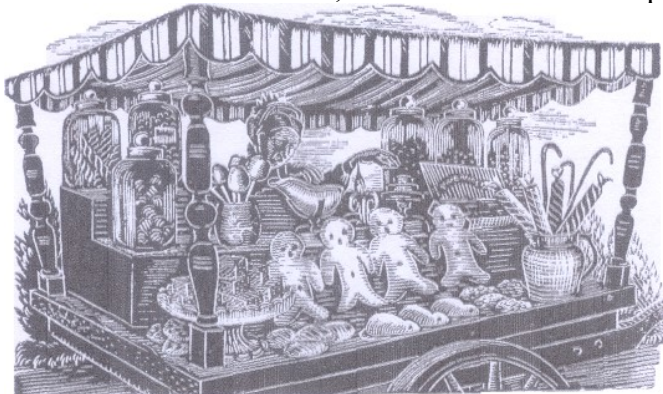
In between came an occasional wedding or christening, the family pig-feast, for which daughters in service, and married sons with their families, came home; or the scene might be enlivened by the visit of a soldier son, home on furlough, who would stroll round the hamlet in his scarlet tunic to shake hands with old friends and neighbours, and to chase the urchins who, on his appearance, would strike up *See the Conquering Hero comes!* Once or twice in the winter hounds would meet in the vicinity, the men riders in their hunting pink and toppers, the ladies, sitting side-saddle, in long, flowing habits, and, on those occasions the whole population would turn out to admire and to cry 'Tally-ho!'

The discussion of their own and their neighbours' affairs took the place occupied by books and films in the modern outlook. Nothing of outside importance ever happened there, and their lives were as unlike as possible the modern conception of country life, for Lark Rise was neither a little hot-bed of vice nor a garden of all the Arcadian virtues. But the lives of all human beings, however narrow, have room for complications for themselves and entertainment for the onlooker, and many a satisfying little drama was played out on that ten-foot stage.

There were many such small communities dotted about that countryside, each with its own traditions, conventions, and superstitions, and few without some man or woman of character who, by their skill, racy humour, and simple goodness of heart out-topped their fellows. They came, they lived unrecorded, and in the fullness of time they went to join their fathers in the long, low, unmarked mounds in the village churchyards, and most of them, in this changed world, have been long forgotten.

But it happened that at Lark Rise in the 1880s a child was growing up who was a born observer. Nothing which happened around her escaped her notice and, about past times in the hamlet she asked so many questions that the neighbours called her 'a fair werrit.' They little thought that she was the 'chiel among them takin' notes,' and would one day print them.

I never could remember in after-life when I began to write, but, at seven years old I was penning letters in rhyme to Santa Claus, to be attached to my own and my brother's Christmas stockings, and, a little later, I was running a family magazine, which continued until my mother's grocer changed the colour of his sugar-wrapping paper from greyish white to a very dark blue, upon which no ink would show, and so caused me to experience my first paper shortage.



'Harvest Home'

The school in the neighbouring village which I attended had not an extensive curriculum. The three 'R.'s and unlimited scripture, nothing more. But the old red *Royal Readers* in use there comprised between them a first-class anthology of English poetry and prose, and there were daily Bible readings, so the minds of willing readers were not ill-stored. There were books at home, too, few, but good in an old-fashioned way, and books to be borrowed from neighbours. And, later, when my horizon widened to include other places than the hamlet, Candleford and Candleford Green amongst them, there were other country ways of living to study and to enjoy. In 1912 I began to write for the press and, from that time on, short stories, articles, and verse of mine appeared in various periodicals. But it was not until the 1920s that the idea took shape in my mind that a book about my old home might please readers. At that time, from 1921 to 1928, I was contributing a series of nature and country-life articles to one of the Catholic weeklies. During those years I received many kind letters of appreciation from readers, at home and overseas. From these letters I found that the feature most liked in the articles were the sketches of old country life and characters, remembered from my childhood, and I determined that in some future time I would describe them more fully.

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May, 1947

Miss Flora Thompson

THE GROWING COMPANY OF READERS of her books will grieve to learn that Flora Thompson died recently at Brixham. She was born in 1877 [actually Dec 1876] at Juniper, a hamlet on the Oxfordshire-Northamptonshire border described so vividly in her first book as *Lark Rise*. Her parents were humble and hard working, but her mother was certainly endowed with unusual wisdom. From her and the little school which she left at fourteen she acquired the grounding for an education that was to come later. As a small child she used to carry the letters in a locked leather bag to the big house nearby, and so she began her long connection with the post office.

After leaving school she was sent to be an assistant to a lady who kept a village post office and smithy, and who has a large place in the last book, *Candleford Green*, of her trilogy, as Miss Lane. Flora Thompson married young a husband who was eventually to become a postmaster, and his work took them to Bournemouth. Here she discovered the public library, and began to read the Greeks and Romans in translation, the English poets, novelists, and critics, and especially Shaw, Yeats, and Ibsen. She started to write, and her first publication was a collection of poems, *Bogmyrtle and Peat*.

But it was her three autobiographical novels that brought her to fame. In this trilogy, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, is preserved a picture of rural life of the seventies and eighties which has perhaps never been more truthfully or enchantingly portrayed. A fourth volume, *Still Glides the Stream*, is to appear shortly.

In the late twenties she formed the Peverel Society, composed of some fifty members. These would contribute manuscripts which were circulated for criticism, Miss Thompson being the final judge. In her last years she led a retired life, devoting herself to her writing: but those who were privileged to enjoy her friendship and her letters will not soon forget this quiet, witty, and most kind of ladies. She is survived by her husband, a son in Australia, and a daughter. Her younger son was lost at sea in the last war.