

Flora's Heatherley



**An historical play based on
Flora Thompson's time in Grayshott
1898-1901**

John Owen Smith

Flora's Heatherley

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Flora's Heatherley

First part of 'Grayscott to Griggs Green'

Flora Thompson in Grayscott 1898-1901

Flora came to Grayscott (her "Heatherley") in 1898 at the age of 21 to take the position of sub-postoffice assistant, and stayed for two and a half years. She arrived as a young, gauche, country girl, and passed "from foolish youth to wicked adolescence" in the village.

The theme of the play is essentially about the conventions of the period, particularly with respect to courtship and marriage, and Flora's difficulty in conforming to them.

She drew disapproval by associating with 'strange' men, and walking for miles alone on the surrounding heaths. She felt more at home having tea with a retired 'big-game' hunter, or learning about local wildlife from a cowman on the common, than walking decorously up and down the village street with the other village girls.

Meanwhile she could no longer stand the quarrels between the postmaster and his wife, and found lodgings on her own for the first time in her life. [Two years later he murdered his wife and was diagnosed as criminally insane]. At the same time, her beloved brother volunteered to fight in the Boer War, and she looked with concern for his name every time she posted up the latest news.

She came in contact with the literary 'greats' who lived locally at the time: Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, Richard le Gallienne and Grant Allen all used her post office. The immediate effect was to make her destroy all her writings up to that time – but it almost certainly encouraged her writing career in the long run.

During her last year in 'Heatherley' she met the man she calls 'Richard Brownlow.' He came close to proposing to her, but in the end she left the village still a single girl. She married another post office worker, John, less than two years later – and at the end of the play we anticipate the effect this is to have on the 'free spirit' we observed in 'Heatherley'. He will become the 'dodder' in her life.

A second play, "Flora's Peverel," covers Flora's life in Liphook from 1916–28 as a married woman with children of her own.

Flora's Heatherley

Act 1 - 1899

Scene 1: Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office, 1899

Scene 2: In Grayshott Post Office, next morning

Scene 3: At the site of the proposed Refreshment House, Grayshott

Scene 4: In Grayshott Post Office, some weeks later

Scene 5: On Ludshott Common, later that day

Scene 6: A Sunday afternoon in Crossways Road, Grayshott

Scene 7: In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Scene 8: Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office, that night

Scene 9: In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Scene 10: In Crossways Road, Grayshott, soon after

Scene 11: In Mr Foreshaw's House, next Sunday afternoon

Scene 12: In Crossways Road, Grayshott, a Sunday afternoon some weeks later

Scene 13: The opening of the Fox & Pelican, Grayshott

Scene 14: In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

- INTERVAL -

Act 2 - 1901

Scene 15: In Grayshott Post Office, 1901

Scene 16: In the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office

Scene 17: At Flora's lodgings with Mrs Parkhurst

Scene 18: Sir Frederick Pollock meets with Conan Doyle

Scene 19: In Grayshott Post Office soon after

Scene 20: On Ludshott Common soon after

Scene 21: In Crossways Road, Grayshott

Scene 22: Mrs Parkhurst's house, some weeks later

Scene 23: In Grayshott Post Office, some time later

Scene 24: In Crossways Road, immediately after

Scene 25: In Grayshott Post Office, at the same time

~~Scene 26: In Crossways Road, Grayshott, some time later~~

Scene 27: By the new Hindhead Telegraph Office

Scene 28: Mrs Parkhurst's house, some days later

Scene 29: In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Scene 30: Farewells in Grayshott

Scene 31: Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office

Scene 32: Epilogue

Scene 33: Flora's Wedding, 7th January 1903, at Twickenham

Cast (ages in 1899)

Walter Chapman (43)
Emily Chapman (36)
Annie Symonds (20)
Flora Timms (22)
Charles Foreshaw (an old 62)
Sir Frederick Pollock (54)
George Bernard Shaw (43)
Marion (21)
Bob Pikesley (an old 40)
Isobel ('Izzy') - (20)
~~Winifred Storr (13)~~
~~Grace ('Gee') Leuchars (14)~~
Arthur Conan Doyle (40)
Ernest Chapman (41)
Richard Brownlow (22)
Mavis Brownlow (20)
Mrs Parkhurst (an old 45)
Mrs Davidson (say 50)
William Sillick, reporter (21)
Man in the Pub
~~Alfred & Willie, telegram boys~~
John Thompson - *non-speaking*
Flora as a Bride - *non-speaking*

Flora's Heatherley

Scene 1

Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office, 1899

Offstage we hear a commotion

Walter Chapman (*Shouting*) Enjoyed it, did you? Left me here on my own and enjoyed yourself!

Emily Chapman But you said I could go – you gave me the ticket.

Walter Chapman (*Entering*) A piano recital! A two guinea ticket to a piano recital!

Emily Chapman (*Follows*) The ticket was free – complimentary – for the post office.

Walter Chapman I am the postmaster here, not you.

Emily Chapman But you said ...

Walter Chapman You know he lies in wait for me. (*Hissing under his breath*) To be or not to be.

Emily Chapman Nobody lies in wait for you, Walter.

Walter Chapman Imagine it, do I? (*Hissing*) Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

Emily Chapman Walter ...

Walter Chapman He thinks he'll get me, but I'll get him first! (*He has a headache*) My head!

Emily Chapman There's no-one.

Walter Chapman Or perhaps it's that girl – perhaps she's been sent by him.

Emily Chapman Not Flora!

Walter Chapman Miss Timms – yes, perhaps it's her. She'll let him in while I'm asleep – he'll murder us in our beds!

Emily Chapman She'll hear us – she's only in the next room.

Walter Chapman But I have my revolver ready.

Emily Chapman Walter, you must see a doctor – be reasonable.

Walter Chapman (*Reacting angrily*) A doctor? A doctor, Mrs Chapman? And what do you think a doctor can do for me, eh? My heart is buried in poor Letty's grave! Can Dr Lyndon bring her back?

Emily Chapman She has been dead for over twenty years!

Walter Chapman You are in her place – her place! She would not have left me tonight.

Emily Chapman We have three children now – ours – yours and mine – do they mean nothing to you?

Walter Chapman Her picture's still on my bedroom wall – she would not have left me. (*Incoherent*) Why did you leave me, Letty?

Emily Chapman Walter!

Walter Chapman (*Turning on Emily*) And now I have to live with you!

Emily Chapman Walter, no!

Walter Chapman You and your immorality!

Emily Chapman (*Getting hysterical*) No!

Walter Chapman (*Hissing*) Vengeance is mine ...

Emily Chapman No, Walter! No!

Walter Chapman ... I will repay, saith the Lord.

Emily Chapman (*Running off, weeping*) No! No! No!

Walter Chapman (*Following her, shouting*) I will repay, saith the Lord!

Scene 2

In Grayshott Post Office, next morning

Flora and Annie are at work behind the counter

Annie You're brooding again, Flora.

Flora I'm sorry, Annie. (*Smiling for her*) Is that better?

Annie Yes. You think too much, you know, that's your trouble.

Flora I'm older than you.

Annie Only by two years! Were they arguing again last night?

Flora Yes.

Annie It gets you down, doesn't it?

Flora I have to live in the same house.

Annie They're just a typical married couple – always falling in and falling out with each other.

Flora I think it's a bit more serious than that.

Annie There you are – thinking again! They've different temperaments, that's all. Stands to reason they'll tiff from time to time.

Flora You don't have to listen to it every evening.

Annie Cheer up! (*Sorting the mail*) Ly-ces-ter, War-ces-ter, Has-le-merry – isn't English a funny language!

Flora But he'll come out here today to meet his trade customers as if nothing's happened.

Annie There you are then. (*Still sorting*) Look, this one's going to Bucking-ham – isn't that near where you come from?

Flora Yes, my Uncle Tom lives there. I wonder who's writing ...

The telegraph machine starts to tinkle out its message

Annie Telegraph coming! Shall I take it down this time?

Flora The sooner you learn, the sooner I can have some half days off.

Annie All I need is practice.

Flora I'll listen to it from here and see if you get it right.

Annie (*Going off to the machine*) I only got two letters wrong last time.

The telegraph machine continues its message

Annie FORESHAW – it's for Mr Foreshaw.

Flora Concentrate, or you'll miss the rest of it.

As the machine tinkles on, an old gentleman enters. It is Mr Foreshaw, though Flora does not know him – he has some envelopes in his arthritic hands.

Foreshaw Some stamps for these letters, if you please.

Flora Certainly, sir. (*She removes the stamps from her ledger book*) Three letters – that's thruppence please. (*Takes the money and hands the stamps to him*) Thank you – your stamps.

She can see that he has difficulty in sticking them on

Foreshaw Hands aren't all they used to be, I'm afraid.

Flora Here, let me help – I'll stick them on for you. *(She takes them back and starts to do so)*

Foreshaw Against post office rules, you know. Get you into trouble.

Flora I don't think the Postmaster-General is looking.

By this time the tinkling of the telegraph machine has stopped, and Annie returns

Annie Here we are – I think it makes sense. Oh, Mr Foreshaw, you're here!

Flora You are Mr Foreshaw?

Foreshaw I am.

Annie There's a telegram just arrived for you.

Foreshaw Indeed. What does it say?

Annie hands the message to him

Thank you. *(He reads it)* Huh, I see. Yes. I see. Well. Thank you – good day to you then. *(He turns and exits)*

Flora He was a bit gruff.

Annie Oh, don't worry about him – he's known to be a woman-hater.

Flora Is he indeed? Why should that be?

Annie I don't know. It's said he won't have a woman in the house. Did I get the message right?

Flora I hope so – you forgot to show it to me!

Annie He had a bungalow built for himself two or three years ago at the end of a long track. He lives there on his own.

Flora Poor old man.

Annie Why 'poor old man'? – I expect he enjoys being alone. Anyway, you're a fine one to talk. You go walking for miles across the commons on your own.

Flora I'm not sure I'd like to *live* on my own though.

Annie Don't worry, Mr Right will come along for you one day, then you'll be all right. *(Laughs at the pun)* Men prefer a quiet sort like you for a wife.

Flora For a wife? I shan't get married.

Annie Course you will. It's only natural for a woman – my mother says.

Flora Not for me.

Annie You just wait, he'll come along – and when he says 'snip' you'll say 'snap' fast enough.

Flora *(Laughing)* Annie, what a thing! Is that what your mother says too?

Annie Yes, and she's right. You wait and see.

Walter Chapman has entered silently and stands behind Flora. She turns round suddenly and is startled to see him there. As she reacts, he throws back his head and goes through a 'pantomime of hilarious laughter' without uttering a sound.

Flora Mr Chapman, you startled me!

Walter Chapman Just checking everything is all right, Miss Timms – just checking.

Flora Everything is fine, thank you.

Walter Chapman And Miss Symonds?

Annie No problems at all, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman Good. Good. Then I shall return to my carpentry. We must all earn our living. (*He turns to exit, then looks back*) You have not seen Mrs Chapman recently?

Flora I'm afraid not.

Walter Chapman It matters not, it matters not. (*He exits*)

Annie I expect she's walked out on him again.

Flora Is that saying 'snap' when he says 'snip'?

Annie Oh, she'll come back – she always does. Like I say, just a tiff. (*Looking out of the window*) Now what's going on out there?

Flora Where?

Annie By the crossroads. That writer with the red beard's there – still on his crutch. They say he fell off a bicycle.

Flora Mr Bernard Shaw.

Annie You know him?

Flora Only by name – from the letters addressed to him.

Annie I thought he might be one of those strange men you're always talking to on your walks.

Flora (*Bruised*) Annie!

Annie You're getting a reputation you know. Much safer to stick with us girls. Oh look, there's Sir Frederick Pollock with him. Must be about the new pub.

Flora Refreshment House you mean.

Annie Refreshment House! Can you see that idea working in Grayshott? Can you see old Alfie Wells drinking mineral water?

Flora Who?

Annie Alfie, the blacksmith. Works in a shower of sparks and swear-words. They'll get no trade from the likes of him if they don't sell beer.

Flora I think they mean to sell it, but not at a profit.

Annie Sounds silly to me. It won't work here, mark my words.

Scene 3

At the site of the proposed Refreshment House, Grayshott

George Bernard Shaw, on a crutch, talks with Sir Frederick Pollock

Pollock We have the licence, Mr Shaw. Our Grayshott & District Refreshment Association may now proceed with its plans.

Shaw There'll be opposition of course. Lady Mary Murray down in Tilford told me we were deliberately opening a centre for crime and demoralisation.

Pollock She's a daughter of Lord Carlisle – what do you expect from the Liberal-Temperance press?

Shaw I suggested that perhaps she'd prefer the Alton brewers to build a public house here instead, for that was the likely alternative.

Pollock I imagine she was not persuaded by the argument.

Shaw She was not either. We intend to stock alcoholic drinks, and that's cause enough for her to condemn us – no matter that we shall also supply the community with tea, coffee and good nourishing food.

Pollock And the manager will receive his commission from the sale of those, not on the sale of alcohol.

Shaw So I told her.

Pollock It's an experiment which has succeeded elsewhere. It has the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less.

Shaw And deserves the hearty sympathy of all those with *intelligence* who are on the side of temperance in the village – whether they drink or not.

Pollock But does it not offend your Socialist principles, Mr Shaw? We may perhaps stand accused of denying the working man his natural environment.

Shaw The inhabitants of Hindhead and Grayshott, Sir Frederick, have insisted on my lecturing to them constantly since I arrived here, and will hear of no other subject than Socialism. Personally, I have come just to get some rest from Socialist propaganda and to recover my broken health.

Pollock Point taken, point taken. But Socialism is not your only subject. I gather at one of your meetings you recently '*cured Conan Doyle of sentimental pacifism and left him a raging Jingo!*', as someone put it.

Shaw That was just up the road in the Congregational Hall. He was in the chair, and we had a very lively discussion on European Disarmament. You should have come along.

Pollock I'll no doubt read the reports in the press.

Shaw We were not far from Doyle's new house there, of course. *Undershaw* – did you ever hear such an awful pun in naming a house!

Pollock Pun?

Shaw People are saying he called it that just because I live a bit up the hill from him.

Pollock He tells me his '*shaw*' is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning '*grove of trees*.' But perhaps you should be flattered. He could equally have called it *Underrussell* or even *Underpollock* I suppose.

Shaw That would be taking a pun too far. In years to come, people here will wonder at the strange clutch of characters who came to inhabit their hill top.

Pollock I think they already do. How many of them, I wonder, really understand these speeches of yours. Socialism – Pacifism – Vegetarianism – Disestablishmentarianism ...

Shaw That's the talk of a feudal lord! – insulting their intelligence.

Pollock Intelligence, no. But the district seems to have become some sort of literary ghetto in recent years – authors of all sorts and styles here – and pretty confusing for the average person, I think.

Shaw Well I intend to donate a small library of books to this Refreshment House when it opens – to extend the mind as well as the body of your average person.

Pollock Something from our local authors?

Shaw Probably not – the customers will have heard enough of them. One of Tolstoy's later works perhaps, some of Kipling's short stories, an illustrated George Du Maurier ...

Pollock And no doubt some learned tracts on Socialism, Temperance and the rest?

Shaw (*Chuckling*) That's a possibility, Sir Frederick, a possibility.

Scene 4

In Grayshott Post Office, some weeks later

Marion enters the shop – she is a moon-faced girl in her early twenties, and is flustered

Marion Flora, I need your help.

Flora Why, Marion, shouldn't you be in your sweet shop? What's all this?

Marion It's for the Christian Endeavour movement. You know we have a guest speaker each Thursday evening at the chapel.

Flora I remember you telling me – it's your job to put the glass of water on the table for them.

Marion Yes – but the new pastor has decided we members should take it in turns to speak ourselves, *instead* of having a guest.

Flora And by the look on your face, Marion, I'd say you've just found out it's your turn soon.

Marion In a fortnight! Flora, what shall I talk about? I've never done anything like this before.

Flora Does it have to be a religious subject?

Marion Not always, but it has to be serious. Do you think '*Total Abstinence versus Moderation*' would do? I heard an excellent address on that at a Band of Hope meeting once – I think I can remember most of it.

Flora The village might be a bit weary of that topic at the moment. Try something that's new to them. Something you know more about than they do.

Marion But what? My mind's a complete blank.

Flora Well, let's think then – how about as a title, 'The Sweets of Life'? You could tell them some of your experiences in the sweet shop as a little light relief, then go on and draw the moral that the best things in life actually cost nothing.

Marion (*Her eyes opened*) Flora, that's wonderful! How do you come up with these ideas? Oh, that's such a relief!

Flora Now all you have to do is write it.

Marion Write it – yes.

Flora In a fortnight.

Marion Yes. I'll start now – well, as soon as the shop shuts. Oh, you've taken a weight off my mind, Flora, I don't mind telling you. I don't know how you do it, I really don't. I'll bring you in a bag of fruit drops next time I come. (*She exits gleefully to the street*)

Annie enters from inside the post office

Annie Was that sweet Marion?

Flora After ideas for a speech to the chapel.

Annie Marion, make a speech? Good heavens, I can't imagine it – she's not the type.

Flora I gave her the first title that came into my head, and she's thrilled with it. I don't think we've seen the last of her though.

Annie Nor do I. She'll be asking you to write it next.

Flora If I write anything in my spare time, it won't be speeches to the Christian Endeavour movement.

Annie What will it be then?

Flora I don't know. I've been a great 'spoiler of paper,' as my mother put it, in the past – but somehow, here in Grayshott ...

Annie It's the ideal place to write. There's famous authors all around us.

Flora Yes. But seeing them here has made me ashamed of all my old efforts. In fact I put a match to some of them the other night.

Annie Flora! How could you? All that work gone.

Flora It was nothing much. A journal I was keeping and a few other scraps. They'll not be missed. (*More brightly*) Anyway, now you're back I can be on my way – my shift ended five minutes ago. (*She starts getting ready to leave*)

Annie Yes. I don't normally see you for dust – out of that door quick as a flash you are, usually. Got a secret admirer somewhere, have you?

Flora You know I haven't.

Annie (*Only half jokingly*) I'm not so sure. You're a deep one, you are. Where are you off to this time, then? Meeting Bob Pikesley in the middle of nowhere again?

Flora I wish I hadn't mentioned him to you now – we were only sheltering from a storm together.

Annie (*Laughing*) Tell *that* to the curate!

Flora Anyway, I'm off down to Waggoners Wells today – nowhere near Bob Pikesley's place.

Annie Right past old Boddy Hill the broomsquire's though. Tongues will wag.

Flora (*Ready to go*) Let them wag. I just want to enjoy God's good air in my own good company.

Annie (*Rather primly*) See you tomorrow, then. Enjoy yourself – and your own good company.

Flora exits quickly into the street as Annie gets on with her work

Flora (*To herself*) Why does everyone have to be so interested in other people's affairs? If you're not seen to be doing the right thing, and on your way to getting decently married, you never hear the last of it. (*She walks off*)

Walter Chapman has entered silently and stands behind Annie – she senses him and jumps

Walter Chapman I'm just seeing if Mr Vertue has arrived.

Annie N-no, sir, he hasn't. But I'm told your brother was looking for you earlier.

Walter Chapman My brother Ernest is not important. He would only want to talk religion and reconciliation to me. Mr Vertue is coming to discuss business.

Annie Yes, sir.

Walter Chapman If you see him, you will let me know.

Annie I will, sir.

Walter Chapman Thank you. (*Hissing*) 'Now is the winter of our discontent.'

Annie Our what?

Walter Chapman No matter. It is some carving he wants me to do – for his private chapel.

Annie (*Dubiously*) I see.

Walter Chapman I shall go back and sharpen my tools – in preparation. Dangerous to use blunt tools on a job, you know.

Walter exits into the house as the lights fade on the scene

Scene 5

On Ludshott Common, later that day

Flora out walking, observing nature as she goes, almost walks into Bob Pikesley

Bob Pikesley A'ternoon.

Flora (*Startled*) Oh, Bob. Good afternoon. You're a long way from home.

Bob Pikesley Few miles—no distance at all. (*Pause*) Weather's on the turn.

Flora Is it? I thought it looked quite settled.

Bob Pikesley Be rain afore you get home.

Flora I don't mind the rain. At least, not unless it's too heavy.

Bob Pikesley It'll be heavy.

Flora You think so?

Bob Pikesley Like last time.

Flora Well there's plenty of cover here if I need it—and I'll remember what you told me, about not sitting on wet pine needles.

Bob Pikesley Helpless crittur you were to be sure. There's always a dry seat under pines in any weather.

Flora I know—I remember. Just brush the top inch of needles aside ...

Bob Pikesley Then sit down, lean your back against the trunk, and you'll have a seat fit for a queen.

Flora Warm and dry.

Bob Pikesley Aye, warm and dry. That's more than I'd wish for that dressed up, la-di-da young devil who visited me the other day though.

Flora Who?

Bob Pikesley A sanitary inspector, he called himself. Came from God knows where and told me to dig a 'proper well' as he called it, or I couldn't sell no more milk. He said my spring was polluted. Eighty pounds that'll cost me, according to 'Dumpy' Winchester.

Flora That's hard lines.

Bob Pikesley Hard lines? Put me in debt for the rest of my life, it will. Just sent here by the devil to make me sink that well, he was. Not interfering with nobody else as I hears of.

Flora People are getting very germ-conscious now.

Bob Pikesley He's only here for a short while, too. He'll be gone by the time the well's dug. I'd well him if I had my way—put him down the thing and make him stay there!

Flora (*Changing the subject*) You say you know this common like the back of your hand.

Bob Pikesley Aye, and every flower, bird and beast upon it.

Flora They tell me there's adders here, but I've never seen one.

Bob Pikesley You never have? They're all around you. Look—watch you here. But be quiet now.

He beckons her to follow him, and they creep to one side. He puts a finger to his lips to keep her silent, and points into the undergrowth

Bob Pikesley (*Whispering*) There—do you see? Coming out of the heather and onto the path.

Flora How did you ... ?

Bob Pikesley (*Motioning her to keep quiet*) See them marks? They're Vs—V's for viper. Never you touch a snake with them marks on it. There—now he's gone.

Flora How did you know it was there?

Bob Pikesley I saw the heather over there moving in sort of waves, so I knew a snake of some sort were coming our way. Shrews and mice don't make it move like that. Now grass snakes like cooler places, and slow worms don't make much stir when they move, so stands to reason it was an adder.

Flora I'm glad you didn't kill it.

Bob Pikesley They don't hurt me, so why should I hurt them? Unless I find one near my cowshed, of course. Now that reminds me—you'll be passing my cottage on your way home.

Flora Yes, I can go that way.

Bob Pikesley Then take a message to my sister. I'll be a while on the heath yet, so she'd better do the cows tonight. You'll remember to tell her that, will you?

Flora I'll remember that, Bob.

Bob Pikesley Well, run along then.

Flora feels reluctant to be ordered around, a bit like a child, and lingers

Go on with you! And mind the snakes! (*To himself as she exits*) Helpless young crittur!

Scene 6

A Sunday afternoon in Crossways Road, Grayshott

Annie and Isobel are out walking, dressed up, and in conversation

Annie What a glorious day, Aunt Izzy. Let's take a walk up to the turnpike and back.

Isobel And watch all those terrible women cycling past wearing their ghastly bloomers. What fun!

Annie Remember that one we saw last week, wearing a man's felt hat with a big long feather sticking up at the side?

Isobel Heavens yes! I'd rather see me dead in my coffin than out dressed like that. Common I call it. Almost as bad as being one of those 'New Women'.

Annie The ones shouting 'Votes for Women!'

Isobel One of my friends calls them 'A lot of coarse great ugly things who can't get themselves husbands'.

Annie You should hear my father on about them. 'Give 'em votes?' he says, 'If I had my way I'd give 'em a good slap on the bottom and make 'em stay at home where they belong'.

Isobel I can't imagine people like that living here in the village though, can you Annie? Think of our friends—and your little 'garden of girls'—there's none of them like that.

Annie There's a big, wide world outside Grayshott though, Aun Izzy.

Isobel Now you're being clever. Remember the old motto: 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.'

Annie That's from Charles Kingsley.

Isobel And that's being clever again. Men don't like clever girls – never did! – you'll end up being an old maid if you're not careful, then you'll be sorry.

Annie (*Protesting*) I'm not being clever – I just enjoy reading. Don't you? Don't you love Christina Rossetti for instance? She's my favourite. '*When I am dead my dearest, Sing no sad songs for me ...*'

Isobel Oh, leave that dreary rot to the children and thank the gods and little fishes your schooldays are over!

Annie And I'm out of the clutches of "Podgy" Ward.

Isobel And those dreadful inspections by Miss I'Anson. I remember her clipping Willie Harris round the ear one day.

Annie After saying it would hurt her more than it hurt him!

Isobel Throw your exercise books away! We're *fin de seekle* now.

Annie We're what?

Isobel *Fin de seekle*. It means 'end of the century'.

Annie Is that how you pronounce it?

Isobel I think so. Look, don't start being clever again.

Annie Sorry. It's just that you make it sound like a bit of fish. I was imagining this poor 'seekle' swimming around in the local lakes.

Isobel Annie, stop being a tease! When were you last down by the lakes anyway? You've not been out walking with 'stalking Flora' have you?

Annie That's rotten of you. She's a good friend of mine. We get on very well.

Isobel Always out on her own, talking to old men. I think that's weird, don't you?

Annie She knows a lot about the countryside.

Isobel Who wants to know about that? You can't marry the countryside can you? She should settle down and have a family. How old is she?

Annie Over twenty-one.

Isobel That's ancient! – and with no man in prospect yet.

Annie Well, I'm not going to be a gossip – I think it's *her* business, don't you?

Isobel No need to snap, dear Annie. I married Eric and you have your Arthur – at least we shan't get left on the shelf. Look, there's Martha and Fanny ahead – shall we catch them up and hear what gossip they've got?

Scene 7

In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Flora is busy serving young Winifred Storr and Grace ("Gee") Leuchars

~~**Flora** Right, Winifred, that's a half-crown postal order – and how many stamps?~~

~~**Winifred** How many cards did you buy, Gee?~~

~~**Gee** Just these two.~~

~~**Winifred** And I've got three.~~

~~**Flora** Five ha'penny stamps for the post-cards, then. That's tuppence ha'penny. Anything else?~~

~~**Gee** Should I get one for Madeleine?~~

~~**Winifred** That's up to you.~~

~~**Gee** What do you think?~~

~~Winifred~~ She's coming back home tomorrow, Gee. You'll see her then,

~~Gee~~ But if I send to the others and not to her ...

~~Winifred~~ Well get one if you think you should.

~~Gee~~ She'll have left before it arrives though.

~~Winifred~~ Not if it catches the next post. Ask Miss Timms.

~~Flora~~ You've just missed one, I'm afraid.

~~Winifred~~ I tell you what—buy her a card now and give it to her when she arrives.

~~Gee~~ Winifred, that's silly!

~~Winifred~~ It's the thought that counts, my granny says.

~~Gee~~ No—it's not the same if it's not properly posted.

~~Winifred~~ Well, are you or aren't you? Make up your mind.

~~Gee~~ I can't decide.

~~Flora~~ You only live just round the corner, Grace. You can always pop back if you change your mind.

~~Winifred~~ Yes—and I've got to cycle all the way back to Hindhead. Come on.

~~Gee~~ All right, I'll leave it for now.

~~Flora~~ Right. That's two and sixpence plus a penny poundage for the postal order, and tuppence ha'penny for the stamps—two and ninepence ha'penny then, please. Who's paying?

~~Winifred~~ I'll pay—the postal order's for granny. *(She hands Flora some coins)*

~~Flora~~ So—you've given me three shillings—and there's tuppence ha'penny change. Is that right?

~~Winifred~~ *(Calculating)* Er—yes.

~~Flora~~ *(Laughing)* But only just, eh?

~~Gee~~ *(To Winifred)* I owe you a penny.

~~Winifred~~ Oh never mind that. Let's go and write these cards in your house now, then we can come back and put them in the box.

~~Flora~~ Goodbye. Good writing.

~~Winifred & Gee~~ *(As they exit)* Goodbye.

Emily Chapman enters hesitantly. She comes over to Flora

~~Emily Chapman~~ Nice girls.

~~Flora~~ Yes, charming.

~~Emily Chapman~~ From good families.

~~Flora~~ So I believe.

~~Emily Chapman~~ *(Distantly)* Lucky children.

~~Flora~~ *(Hesitantly)* Are you feeling all right, Mrs Chapman?

~~Emily Chapman~~ Yes—yes, thank you. *(A pause)* I fear we embarrassed you the other night.

~~Flora~~ The other night?

~~Emily Chapman~~ When you brought the cash into the house at the end of business. My husband and I were ... Well, it must have been embarrassing for you. I'm sorry.

~~Flora~~ No, really ...

Emily Chapman Me sitting there on the hearthrug with my head on my husband's knee – you must have wondered ...

Flora It was nothing. In fact I was very glad to see you looking so happy.

Emily Chapman Happy. For once. Yes, I suppose I was. (*A pause*) It's not easy – a young girl like you living in, and with a family like ours.

Flora (*Carefully*) I am quite comfortable here.

Emily Chapman Are you? With the footsteps outside your bedroom in the middle of the night? Don't tell me you haven't heard them. I've seen the way you've looked at him sometimes the next morning.

Flora Mrs Chapman! You're surely not accusing me of ...

Emily Chapman No, my dear. I'm accusing you of nothing other than being a respectable young girl in a difficult situation. My husband wasn't always like this, you know. Does he frighten you?

Flora Mr Chapman? He ...

Emily Chapman He's a man of changing moods. He was very much in love with Letitia, you know – Letty as he calls her.

Flora I've heard him mention her.

Emily Chapman His childhood sweetheart – but her father wouldn't let them marry until Walter had proved himself, earning good money.

Flora And did he?

Emily Chapman Earn money? Yes, eventually, but only by emigrating to Australia for several years. Then, just when he'd booked his passage home with enough money to satisfy even her father, he received a wire: 'Return at once – Letty ill'.

Flora How terrible!

Emily Chapman And in the hurry and confusion of trying to get home quickly, he went down with heat-stroke – it's affected him ever since.

Flora And Letty?

Emily Chapman That's the real tragedy. She died two days before he docked at Southampton. Instead of a wedding, he arrived for a funeral. The shock was almost too much for him to bear. He vowed then never to marry as long as he lived.

Flora But he married you.

Emily Chapman Twenty years afterwards. I suppose he thought time had healed the pain sufficiently. (*A pause*) You know, he can be the most loving of men at times.

Flora I find him very civil.

Emily Chapman And in his trade as a cabinet maker he is second to none.

Flora So I believe.

Emily Chapman It's just that occasionally ... I do wish he'd talk to the doctor about it. (*A pause*) But why am I bothering you with all my problems? You have your own life to live.

Flora Would it be easier for you if I looked for lodgings somewhere else?

Emily Chapman Where would you find anything you could afford? They ask two guineas a week for a front room here in the season – that's twice what you earn.

Flora I'm sure there must be somewhere.

Emily Chapman Don't worry – we'll manage all right with you here.

Two customers enter

I must get back to my children. I just wanted to apologise ...

Flora It's all right, Mrs Chapman. Thank you.

The customers are Arthur Conan Doyle and George Bernard Shaw, deep in conversation

Shaw To be sure, I've never seen anything so abysmal in my life. Never.

Doyle It received a great deal of praise in the local press.

Shaw It did, and that's what concerns me. They might be tempted to repeat the performance. That's why I'm sending off my own account of it to *The Herald*.

Doyle You didn't expect a professional London performance from our poor country amateurs, did you?

Shaw There is a difference, my dear Doyle, between an amateur performance and an amateurish presentation.

Doyle There is?

Shaw There is indeed. As far as the acting was concerned, I was not too unhappy. I have seen all the parts worse done at one time or another by professional actors at first-rate London theatres – though I confess that's not saying very much these days.

Doyle The Bard is not the easiest author to play.

Shaw But they removed all the difficult bits. It wasn't *As You Like It* that we saw there in Pollock's woods – it was a version with all the seriously unflattering characters cut out.

Doyle A sort of 'As You *Didn't* Like It'.

Shaw Those parts they left in virtually acted themselves, even with rank amateurs playing them. But what really made my heart sink was seeing the cottage piano on the set.

Doyle A piano, in Sir Frederick's woods?

Shaw I knew that people who would put a piano outside in the forest of Arden would do anything, and the event fulfilled my worst apprehensions. Why should Amiens sing to a banging drawing-room accompaniment? Why should Silvius struggle in vain in a tunic made for a much smaller man? Why will gentlemen who would rather die than walk down Bond Street in my hat, happily wear any second-hand misfit in a Shakespeare play?

Doyle Ha!

Shaw And why must everyone wear tights? It seems impossible to persuade an amateur that he is acting unless he has tights on.

Doyle Don't you think you're being a bit hard on a local event run to raise money for charity?

Shaw It doesn't bear remembering. I went to it in the most amiable disposition, and at the end no prudent person would have trusted me with a thunderbolt.

Doyle Well they won't invite you again.

Shaw That's the only consolation I have in it. (*To Flora*) A stamp if you please for this broadside.

Doyle You seem to be walking a little better now.

Shaw On my 'insidious injury,' as one reporter called it? Amazing what emotions a sprained ankle can cause in the press, isn't it. I've told them I'm now well on the

road to recovery, and no more bulletins will be issued. *(To Flora, taking the stamp)*
Thank you.

Doyle When do we next take the platform together? *(To Flora)* May I have two shillings worth of stamps, please?

Shaw I shall be talking to the local Band of Mercy again soon, about the evils of meat eating.

Doyle I don't think you'd want me along for that.

Shaw Does Holmes eat meat?

Doyle He generally has more urgent things to do. *(To Flora, taking the stamps)*
Thank you very much. There has been no telegram arrived for Doyle?

Flora Doyle? No, sir. We would send it out to you as soon as one arrived.

Shaw And now he has cheated the Reichenbach Falls, what further great exploits may we expect of him?

Doyle Nothing more strenuous than pursuing a Solitary Cyclist down the Farnham Road at the moment.

Shaw And I'll wager he has the subservient Watson do that for him anyway.

They exit

Flora *(To herself)* How can I ever think of myself as a writer with people like Mr Conan Doyle around me?

Marion enters

Marion Did you see who that was, Flora?

Flora Mr Doyle and Mr Shaw.

Marion Mr Doyle—I wish he could help me with my speech.

Flora Well, you'll have to make do with me, Marion. How's it coming along?

Marion Not very well, I'm afraid. Look, I've tried to write something, but it isn't enough, is it? *(She shows Flora her notebook)*

Flora Your handwriting's awfully spread out. This speech wouldn't last more than a minute.

Marion That's what I mean.

Flora And I think you'll have to change that sentence there—it doesn't read very well as it stands.

Marion Oh dear—now you're making it even shorter.

Flora You'll just have to think of more things to say.

Marion But what else can I say? I've run out of ideas.

Flora Well look, I can't do anything about it now. Would you like me or Annie to come round to your house, to help you with it?

Marion Oh Flora, would you? I can't tell you how worried it's been making me.

Flora I can see. You're starting to droop at the edges. I'll talk to Annie about it tomorrow and see what we can do.

William Sillick enters

Marion Bless you. I'd be ever so grateful. Oh, and here's the fruit drops I promised you. *(Gives a bag to Flora)*

Flora Marion, thank you—you shouldn't have.

Marion That's all right—you can share them with Annie. Thank you again for what you've done. Goodbye for now. *(To Sillick)* Mr Sillick. *(She exits)*

Flora Goodbye Marion. *(To Sillick)* How to solve 'The Case of the Worried Speech-writer.' Elementary, my dear Flora!

Sillick What bribery and corruption is this?

Flora Nothing suitable for your newspaper, William.

Sillick But I saw a package change hands. Has the Christian Endeavour movement sunk to this?

Flora Front page in the *Herald* next week – 'Scandal exposed on Hindhead'.

Sillick 'Your reporter's eye-witness account of a furtive dealing in fruit drops.'

Flora 'Church denies decay in morals,' or should that be molars?

Sillick Something like that. You're in the wrong job Flora.

Flora You think I could earn a living as a headline writer?

Sillick Perhaps – but not here. There's only one living to be earned as a reporter in this village.

Flora And that position's already taken.

Sillick So long as I keep bringing them in the news, all the news and nothing but the news.

Flora Which is why you've come in to see me.

Sillick I did catch a glimpse of two eminent gentlemen leaving your door just now.

Flora And you're hoping I might divulge some trade secrets – but you know me better than that.

Sillick I do. And so I've a better plan.

Flora Tell me, good sir, what do you have in mind.

Sillick A good long tramp across the moors next Sunday, with stewed whortle-berries and cream tea at the *Seven Thorns* afterwards. How about that?

Flora I'd enjoy that very much.

Sillick Then I'll be here for you at ten when you close ... *(Looking out of the window)*
Ah, there goes Mr Doyle now – must see if I can catch him. *(Making for the door)*
Sunday then.

Flora *(After him)* Sunday, William – thank you. *(Lights fade on her)*

Sillick *(Chasing up the road)* Mr Doyle – have you a moment, sir? A word with you if I may – for the *Herald* ...

Scene 8

Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office, that night

Walter and Emily Chapman are arguing off-stage

Emily Chapman Walter, what's the matter now? Come back to bed.

Walter Chapman They're here again! They're after me! Can't you hear them?

Emily Chapman Nobody's after you.

Walter Chapman They're here I tell you! Whispering under the window. Outside.

Emily Chapman It's the middle of the night, Walter. Calm down. You'll wake everybody up.

Walter Chapman I don't care about everybody. It's not everybody they're after – it's me they're after!

They both emerge onto the stage in night-clothes. Walter has a revolver in his hand

Emily Chapman Come back to bed – and please give me that gun.

Walter Chapman Burglars!

Emily Chapman There's no-one.

Walter Chapman You'll not get me, whoever you are! *(He points the revolver through a window and fires)* Take that!

Emily Chapman *(Screaming)* Walter, no!

Walter Chapman There's more where that came from!

Emily Chapman Give me the gun, for God's sake!

Walter Chapman More where that came from.

Flora rushes on, also in night-clothes

Flora What's happening?

Emily Chapman It's all right, Flora. Go back to bed.

Walter Chapman *(To no-one in particular)* You'll not get me.

Flora What was that bang?

Emily Chapman Nothing. Mr Chapman is just having a bad night, that's all.

Walter Chapman *(Hissing)* Revenge is mine!

Emily Chapman Go back to bed, Flora – we'll be all right. We'll be all right.

Emily leads Walter off – Flora stands a while, watching their exit

Flora A bad night? He had a gun in his hand, and I've no lock on my door! The man's insane. He could murder us all at any time. I can't stay here any longer.

Emily reappears

Emily Chapman Go to bed, Flora – it's all right now.

Flora tries to speak, but then turns silently and exits

Please God, let it be all right now! *(Emily exits again)*

Scene 9

In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Annie is serving Mr Foreshaw

Annie A five shilling postal order, Mr Foreshaw – there you are – that will be five shillings and a penny, please.

Foreshaw *(Paying)* And where is our postmistress today?

Annie Miss Timms? She'll be back shortly. She's just popped out to see her new landlady.

Foreshaw I see.

Annie Did you want her for anything?

Foreshaw No, no. She was good enough to deliver a telegram to me the other evening, after hours. Very kind. Very helpful.

Annie What, after we'd closed?

Foreshaw Old colleague from Africa – Zambesi valley '84 – just about to board a train at Waterloo – sent me a wire from there to say he was on his way. First I knew of it.

Annie And Flora brought it round to you herself?

Foreshaw Sat her down and gave her a glass of fruit juice for her trouble. She seemed fascinated by all my maps.

Annie I see.

Foreshaw Just wondering if she might come round again. Well, I'll not keep you from your work. Good day.

Annie Goodbye, Mr Foreshaw – I'll tell her you called.

As Foreshaw exits, Walter Chapman enters from the house holding a sheaf of papers

Walter Chapman Is Miss Timms not here?

Annie No, Mr Chapman – she's just ...

Walter Chapman No matter. There's some correspondence here from London which she must look at. Complaint from Headquarters about late delivery of a telegram.

Annie Late delivery?

Walter Chapman That's what I said. Miss Timms has responsibility for this office, so she must answer it. I have my cabinet-making to attend to.

Annie Yes, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman *(He is about to exit, then turns)* I gather she has found herself new lodgings.

Annie *(Hesitantly)* Yes – with Mrs Parkhurst. Just down the road.

Walter Chapman *(Musingly)* Just down the road. She's happy there?

Annie I believe so.

Walter Chapman Good – good. *(Back to business)* Make sure she sees the papers, will you? *(He exits)*

Annie *(To herself)* There's enough of them!

Flora enters from the street

Flora Well that's done – rent paid in advance.

Annie Oh good. Mr Chapman was just asking how you liked your new place.

Flora What did you say?

Annie I said I thought you did.

Flora I do. My own room with my own fire. I can shut the door on the world – it'll be a haven of peace.

Annie I'd go 'barmy on the crumpet' sitting up there all by myself of an evening, with no-one to talk to.

Flora I'll read, and do a bit of writing. It's what I enjoy.

Annie Well, rather you than me. Oh, your old man was in here just now too, asking after you.

Flora Mr Foreshaw?

Annie He said you'd been round to see him.

Flora Yes, I did. To ...

Annie & Flora *(Together)* ... deliver a telegram.

Annie Yes. At night. And now he's asking if you'd like to go round again.

Flora Oh, come on, Annie. It's not like that – he seems a very nice old gentleman. And so many stories of Africa to tell. He was a big-game hunter once, you know.

Annie I can't understand you, Flora, really I can't. You're either sitting on your own in a little bare room, or you're out talking with strange old men. If you want

to go out, why not come round to tea at my house – and afterwards we'll take a stroll up the road with my Arthur.

Flora That's very kind of you, Annie, but I'm not sure Arthur would really want me along playing 'gooseberry.'

Annie (*A little hurt*) Well, now you're back I must be off home for dinner. (*She puts her hat on*)

Flora What's this pile of papers?

Annie Oh, sorry, I forgot. Mr Chapman brought them out. A complaint from Head Office, he says. (*She puts her coat on*)

Flora (*Flicks through the papers*) All this to do with the late delivery of a telegram?

Annie Seems a bit unfair when you go to the trouble of making personal deliveries out of hours, doesn't it.

Flora It was the time we had that terrific thunder-storm, remember?

Annie When old Marshall's cow was struck dead in the field just at the back here.

Flora And young Alfred came in soaked to the skin from making the last delivery.

Annie A monsoon, my dad called it!

Flora According to this, we were supposed to send him straight back out again.

Annie Nearly drowned, he was – down at Pook's Hill.

Flora Mrs Lyndon complained because we took an hour to deliver her message.

Alf ~~Oh, she would.~~

Annie But we asked Mr Chapman at the time – he said we couldn't possibly.

Flora I know, but now *I* have to answer. It says, '*Climatic conditions are no excuse for the non-delivery of a telegram when a messenger is available. You will return these papers with the telegram properly endorsed and an undertaking that no similar incident occurs in future.*' (*Alf exits to inside room during this*)

Annie (*Laughing*) Flora, how are we supposed to control the weather?

Flora I don't know, but 'Head Office expects' so we'll just have to try. I'll write something suitably apologetic and hope we hear no more.

Marion bursts in from outside

Marion Annie! Flora! I did it! I still can't believe it's true.

Annie Oh, your talk. It was last night wasn't it. How did it go?

Marion Wonderfully! The script that you and Flora wrote for me – and with me wearing my new frock – and taking the cab to the door ...

Flora A cab to the door? But it's only a short walk from your house.

Marion Proper speakers always arrive in cabs Flora – it makes the occasion.

Annie Well, if you say so Marion. Anyway, I'm glad it was such a success.

Marion Oh it was. Thank you so much for your help – and Flora. I don't know what I'd have done.

Flora (*To Annie*) You'd better go for your dinner.

Annie Right. I'll be back in an hour – weather permitting! Come along, Marion – you can tell me all about it as we go. (*They exit to the street*)

Flora Well, I'd better start to earn my keep as a creative writer I suppose. (*Writing*) 'Error regretted. Care shall be taken that it does not occur again.' There! Fairly meaningless, but it should keep them happy.

Scene 10

In Crossways Road, Grayshott, soon after

Ernest Chapman appears, bearded & wearing a 'Boer' hat, and meets his brother Walter

Walter Chapman You shame us, Ernest, by wearing that hat.

Ernest Chapman Shame, brother? It's this nation that should be dying of shame. Killing off good, honest, hard-working farmers and putting their women and children in concentration camps—just because they get in the way of our Imperialist plans for expansion.

Walter Chapman You'd let Kruger and his crew get away with all the insults and violence they've shown to our people out there?

Ernest Chapman You know nothing about it, Walter. Only what you read in the newspapers, and they're not going to report both sides of the argument equally.

Walter Chapman What makes you think you know better?

Ernest Chapman Common sense and a trust in the Lord. The Boers are a god-fearing people.

Walter Chapman Aye, so I'm told—a Bible in one hand and a brandy bottle in the other!

Ernest Chapman It doesn't take much Government propaganda to pull the wool over your eyes.

Walter Chapman Nobody's pulling the wool over anybody's eyes, Ernest. The whole of the village, except you, is in favour of this war.

Ernest Chapman That doesn't make them right.

Walter Chapman You should hear Mr Conan Doyle speak on the subject—that would change your mind.

Ernest Chapman I did, the other night, and it changed my mind not one jot. Fame does not ensure veracity, Walter. He can be as wrong as any other man.

Walter Chapman Well there's many folk around here with men going to the front, including my young assistant, and they don't want to see you going about sporting for the enemy.

Ernest Chapman Miss Timms? I wasn't aware she had a young man.

Walter Chapman Her brother. He was on the point of emigrating to Canada, she tells us, but now he's volunteered for the war instead.

Ernest Chapman I wish I could welcome such patriotism—but I fear it's misplaced.

Walter Chapman I'm no jingoist, brother, as well you know, but your attitude is insulting to the ordinary people here—and it's also bad for business.

Ernest Chapman Ha! I wondered when we'd get round to that. Well, for better or worse, if people in the village want their pipes unfrozen or their roof-tiles fixed, they've no choice but to come to me for it. If they don't want to speak to me the rest of the time, it's no great hardship.

Walter Chapman They have their principles.

Ernest Chapman They have principles? Well I'd hate to be around when they've lost them. I have my faith in the Lord to guide me, Walter, and that's enough for me.

Walter Chapman The Church of England begs to differ.

Ernest Chapman The established church is out of touch and out of date. I may not agree with everything that Mr Bernard Shaw says but, in that at least, I am on his side.

Walter Chapman Ironic, then, that his new Refreshment House is to be opened by a bishop's wife.

Ernest Chapman There are many ironies in life, brother. We must agree to differ as usual, but here – my hand – no hard feelings?

Walter Chapman None that can't be reconciled by healthy argument. I'll agree with that at least.

Scene 11

In Mr Foreshaw's House, next Sunday afternoon

He and Flora are looking at artefacts and maps hanging on the wall

Foreshaw That elephant's tusk there? There's a story behind that too.

Flora You seem to have a story for everything.

Foreshaw What's the point in keeping something if there's no story? This feller was nearly the end of me.

Flora How was that?

Foreshaw The platform I was standing on suddenly gave way – there I was lying sprawled on the ground in front of him. My boys all disappeared like streaks of greased lightning – left me alone, right in his path. I'd wounded him and he was charging straight at me.

Flora What happened?

Foreshaw He collapsed and died just before he got to me. Now what d'you think of these?

Flora Butterflies – but such glorious colours – they look almost painted.

Foreshaw Pretty things – you like them, eh?

Flora I should prefer to see them alive.

Foreshaw For that you would have to travel to East Africa.

Flora How long were you there?

Foreshaw Thirty years, near enough. Hunting and prospecting.

Flora You must find it awfully dull, living round here now.

Foreshaw Dull? Yes, damned dull. I feel old and cold and as dull as ditchwater. Shan't be sorry to go.

Flora Go where?

Foreshaw Wherever old hunters do go. Did I ever tell you I once found an elephants' cemetery? In a swamp. Ivory by the ton! My boys were digging at it for a fortnight. Had to make a special shipment from Beira.

Flora You have no family?

Foreshaw Never married. Didn't want to leave some poor woman crying her eyes out every time I disappeared into the blue. Bad for the nerve. 'He rides swiftest who rides alone,' as that young feller Kipling puts it. D'you read Kipling?

Flora I read anything and everything.

Foreshaw Good, good. Can't abide most of these new men myself, though. Give me Dickens or Thackeray any day. Always carried them with me on expeditions.

Look—see this copy of *Great Expectations*—see the holes in it? Know what made those?

Flora They look like small shot-holes.

Foreshaw White ants—termites. Bore through anything they will. Not boring *you*, am I?

Flora Far from it—I could stay listening to your stories for ever.

Foreshaw Well, you're more than welcome. Only other visitor I get here is the doctor—comes to play chess and check my heart.

Flora I was warned you might be a bit of a woman-hater.

Foreshaw (*Laughing*) Not a hater of women between the ages of fifteen and fifty. But old women of either sex, I absolutely abominate them. Here, it's time for a cup of tea—and I've got some guava jelly in the larder, I'll wager you've never tasted that before.

Flora Not that I can remember.

Foreshaw There's a little room if you want to curl your hair or anything while I'm brewing. I'm an old bachelor, so I may have forgotten some of the things you ladies need—but I've put you out a bottle of eau-de-cologne.

Flora I feel like Mrs Micawber when she went to supper with David!

Foreshaw And after tea we can look at some of my books on Africa—I buy every new one published, you know. You can stay for a while longer?

Flora Sunday afternoons are free time for me.

Foreshaw Good. It's a change to find somebody who's interested. It would be nice to think someone like you could look after my things here when I'm gone. They'll just be scattered and knocked about by strangers otherwise.

Flora I'm sure there's many years in you yet.

Foreshaw Not so sure myself. I've cheated death too many times—snake bites, drought, wild animals, hostile natives ... Takes it out of a body in the end. But enough of this maudlin talk—get yourself spruced up, and I'll make the tea.

Scene 12

In Crossways Road, Grayshott, a Sunday afternoon some weeks later

Isobel is waiting as Annie enters

Isobel There you are, Annie. I was beginning to think you were never coming.

Annie Sorry. Mother wanted a 'talk' with me.

Isobel I thought I might have to take a walk on my own.

Annie (*Teasing*) That would never do! Well, I'm here—where shall we go?

Isobel Up to Fiveways and back?

Annie It's as good as anywhere. We can see how the Refreshment House is coming along.

Isobel Eric thinks it's an evil place. You should hear him. 'Just encourage the riff-raff into the village.'

Annie My father's against it for the opposite reason. He likes his pint, and thinks they won't serve him there.

Isobel I wonder who *will* use it then.

Annie We'll find out when it opens, I suppose. Next week isn't it?

Isobel Well, I know *I* won't be there. What did your mother want to talk about?

Annie The usual – when is Arthur going to name the day.

Isobel Well, when *is* he going to name the day?

Annie Oh, *I* don't know. Don't let's talk about it.

Isobel This isn't my usual bubbly Annie.

Annie No it isn't. Sometimes I wish we girls could be left to sort our own lives out.

Isobel And a proper mess you'd make of it. Parents do know best, you know.

Annie Look at Flora though – independent, does what she wants and enjoys it. No parents around to tell her what to do and what not to do ...

Isobel Well *she's* hardly an example to look up to. Goodness knows, the stories going round about her – you must have heard them.

Annie By people who don't know her.

Isobel I suppose she's round having tea with her old big-game hunter as usual.

Annie No, actually she's taken the train to Aldershot today, to see her brother – he's being drafted to South Africa.

Isobel (*Wind taken out of her sails a bit*) Oh.

Annie He's only nineteen. She's very worried about him, but she won't let it show. 'Never flinch,' she keeps saying.

Isobel And now she's living down with that Mrs Parkhurst. All those children crawling over the house, and no carpet on the stairs I'm told. What a life!

Annie Aunt Izzy, you're a snob!

Isobel My mother wasn't rich, Annie, but at least she kept the house clean and tidy.

Annie You weren't poor. Your father ran his own business ...

Isobel He had to work jolly hard at it.

Annie And there were only three of you to look after.

Isobel Annie – you can go off people, you know.

Annie Sorry. Are we still friends?

Isobel Still friends.

Annie Then (*acting tipsy*) let's go to the pub!

Isobel (*Laughing*) Very *fin de seekle*!

They start to walk off arm in arm

Annie Have you heard what they're going to call it?

Isobel No, what?

Annie The *Fox and Pelican*.

Isobel The what?

Annie The *Fox and Pelican*. Apparently Sir Frederick Pollock chose the name.

Isobel I wonder why?

Annie I could tell you, but I won't, because you'd only say I was being clever again!

Scene 13

The opening of the Fox & Pelican, Grayshott

Sir Frederick Pollock introduces Mrs Davidson, wife of the Bishop of Winchester

Pollock Ladies and gentlemen—as Chairman of the Association, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Mrs Randall Davidson, wife of the Bishop of Winchester, to open our Refreshment House here today. Dr Davidson himself was unable to come, but sends us his best wishes and his full-hearted support for the enterprise.

Given the great interest of the diocese in this project, I believe the name we have chosen for it is particularly fitting, deriving as it does from that great humanist Richard Fox—a previous Bishop of Winchester in the reign of Henry VIII—and the symbol of his notable foundation, Corpus Christi College, which is the Pelican.

So many people have been involved in the scheme that it would be unfair of me to attempt a list of benefactors. Sufficient to say that the £2,000 required for building and furnishings was forthcoming in a very short period of time. In addition we have to thank a number of people for gifts in kind: including Mr Bernard Shaw, who has given us a small but formidable library of books; and Walter Crane, principal of the Royal College of Art, who has painted us a mighty pretty signboard. It is perhaps the only such signboard in the land to have received an Episcopal blessing!

And with that in mind, let me now call upon Mrs Davidson to perform the opening ceremony.

There is general applause

Mrs Davidson Thank you, Sir Frederick, for that kind introduction. I must say it is not every day that I am invited to open a public house. Indeed, I am aware that some people may find my involvement in such an enterprise distasteful—not their cup of tea, if you will excuse the pun. To them I apologise, but if I did not believe these schemes to be in the best interests of temperance generally, I assure you I should not be here

The light fades on her as she continues, and comes up on William Sillick and a local man in the bar

Sillick Good day, sir—for the *Herald*. May I ask, are you a resident of this village?

Man I am that.

Sillick And how do you like your new pub?

Man It's all right.

Sillick No more than 'all right'?

Man Sight too much green paint around, if you ask me. Apart from that ...

Sillick I see you're drinking the beer though.

Man Aye, the mild's not bad. Tuppence-ha'penny a pint. Thruppence for bitter and stout.

Sillick You're not tempted to try the ginger beer or lemonade, then.

Man Are you? Stick to beer, says I. Not a bad brew this either. Want to try some.

Sillick I'm not a great beer drinker myself.

Man Oh ar. Spirits man are you? The landlord's come from the Navy, I'm told—p'raps he'll get you a tot of rum if you ask.

Sillick He sells spirits?

Man He does too, but they're hidden away – same as the beer is. There's always the coffee of course.

Sillick Is there indeed? – I think perhaps I might give that a try. Keep a clear head.

Man Through the door over there, then. They say that's the coffee room.

The light fades, and comes up on Mrs Davidson again

Mrs Davidson ... and whether your want is a coffee or whether your taste is to something a little stronger, I am sure that the excellent Association which has worked so hard to promote this project within the village will make of it a great success in the future. And so now, without further ado, I declare this Refreshment House – the *Fox and Pelican* – open.

There is general applause, and the lights fade

Scene 14

In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Flora is behind the counter – Annie enters with two large covered plates

Annie Here you are Flora – hope you're hungry! Compliments of the *Fox & Pelican*.

Flora I thought you were going home to eat.

Annie I am. These are both for you. Dinner, and pudding.

Flora Let me have a look. *(She looks under the lids)* Annie, they're immense!

Annie It's a good ninepenny-worth.

Flora Look at that roly-poly! There's enough for three of my appetite here.

Annie Perhaps Mrs Chapman will keep some back and heat it up for you again tomorrow.

Flora I could ask her.

Annie I saw Martha and Fanny just now. Can you believe it? – they're wearing khaki!

Flora It's the new fashionable colour. People are starting to realise there's a war on.

Annie And their sailor hats – they've put red, white and blue stripes round them.

Flora Very patriotic.

Annie They said they were going to walk up and down outside Mr Chapman's brother's house – just to show what they think of him and his Boer hat.

Flora *(In jest)* They'd better be careful – they'll be 'New Women' before they know it. Demonstrating on the streets – whatever next!

Annie And your brother's out there now, Flora. I'm sorry – I forgot.

Flora Edwin can look after himself – he'll not flinch. *(Pause)* Thanks for bringing the dinner.

Annie That's all right. I'll be off home – see you later.

Annie exits again to the street. Flora takes the lid off a plate

Flora *(To herself)* Enough here to feed an army! I do hope you'll be all right out there, Edwin.

Walter Chapman enters from the house with papers in his hand

Walter Chapman Miss Timms, another directive from Head Office, I'm afraid.

Flora Not about that late delivery again.

Walter Chapman No, no – they seem to have forgotten about that now. It's the war in South Africa.

Flora Ah, yes.

Walter Chapman In future, telegraph offices are to post a bulletin in the window every Sunday morning, to let the general public know how things are going.

Flora When shall we receive it?

Walter Chapman By ten o'clock in the morning – normal Sunday closing time, it says here – but they expect you to wait for it if it's late.

Flora On a Sunday. For how long?

Walter Chapman That they don't say. They obviously rely on your sense of duty, to remain at your post at a time of National crisis.

Flora Yes, of course.

Walter Chapman I assume you'll have no difficulty in staying if necessary. You have no family to worry about.

Flora Not here in the village.

Walter Chapman No. And I'm certain the good Mrs Parkhurst will keep your dinner hot for you if necessary.

Flora (*Looking at her own dinner getting cold*) Yes, I'm sure she would.

Walter Chapman Then let us consider the matter dealt with. (*Hands her the papers*)

Flora (*Without too much irony*) Thank you, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman Now I must go across the road and ask my brother to fix a loose roof tile for me. That's assuming he's still trading with supporters of the Government!

Chapman exits to the street

Flora (*To herself*) Goodbye Sunday morning walks! Never mind – I'm still young, with plenty of walking years ahead of me. (*Starts picking at her food*) Mr Foreshaw knows Africa – perhaps he can tell me about all the names mentioned in the bulletins. And about the places where Edwin will be ... Tell me he's nothing to fear from poor Boer farmers, compared with charging elephants and poisonous snakes. My dear old gentleman! Will you ever marry and lead a 'normal' life, Flora? The sort of life everyone expects you to lead. No more bumping into Bob Pikesley on the common – no more illicit afternoons taking tea with Mr Foreshaw – no more freedom ... But what freedom have *you* got at the moment, Edwin? It was going to be a new life in Canada for you, but now ... (*Close to tears – but then she controls it*) Flora, you didn't flinch did you? You didn't flinch! What was it mother used to say? 'We are as we are made.' Eat your ninepenny lunch, my girl, and let the world worry about itself for a change.

Music: Boer War tunes during interval

- INTERVAL -

Scene 15

In Grayshott Post Office, 1901

Flora and Annie behind the counter, still in light mourning for the Queen -

Music: 'Soldiers of the Queen' by a brass band comes from outside

Annie You're looking positively radiant today, Flora – what's the secret?

Flora Annie! I'm sure I'm no different from yesterday.

Annie Perhaps. I don't know though. I think it's that Richard Brownlow – he's been in here a lot recently, hasn't he?

Flora Nonsense. You're always trying to pair me off with somebody. Richard and I are ...

Together ... just good friends.

Annie (*Laughing*) Exactly!

Flora He's been down here from London with his sister, visiting relatives.

Annie Several times.

Flora I get on just as well with Mavis.

Annie Lucky she is only his sister though. If she was anything else, you'd be jealous.

Flora I would not.

Annie No? 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.'

Flora 'Oh, but she'll keep her word.'

Together Hamlet!

Annie But *what* word will she keep?

Flora Ah, that's for the play to expose. This 'she' keeps her own counsel.

Annie (*Agreeing*) She does. You're as deep as the day I met you, over two years ago.

Flora (*Listening to the band*) They're still playing out there.

Annie I suppose it's 'Soldiers of the King' now. There's not too many people around who can still remember a king, are there?

Flora You'd have to be in your seventies.

Annie 'Granny' Robinson next door remembers the first train coming to Haslemere. But she was only one when the last king died. (*Pause*) What are they playing for?

Flora Funds for the war effort, I imagine.

Annie I thought the war was nearly over.

Flora My brother's still out there.

Annie Can't be long now though, can it?

Flora Let's hope not. Perhaps I should try to finish this scarf before it all ends – what d'you think? And send it over to Edwin to keep him warm.

She gets out a long, wide scarf of scarlet wool, on woollen needles

Annie (*Laughing*) Oh Flora, it's ridiculous – that colour.

Flora I was given this wool by the relief organisation – not my choice. Keep the boys warm, they said.

Annie It'd make a good mark for one of the Boer snipers to fire at.

Flora That's what everyone says. Perhaps I'd just as well not finish it.

Annie At least you can knit. It's almost a lost art round here. I can't.

Flora That's because you didn't grow up in a homely little village with no shops. We had to make most everything ourselves.

Annie 'Most everything' – makes you sound like a real country yokel.

Flora (*Playing up to her*) Lawk 'a' mussy-O, missy – where be 'ee a-gooin'?

Annie Lucky you don't talk like that to the customers!

Flora I used to speak like it to Mr Foreshaw. It made him laugh.

Annie You miss him, don't you – your old man.

Flora Very much. For weeks afterwards I kept thinking, "Oh, I must remember to tell Mr Foreshaw that" – then I suddenly realised I couldn't any more. (*Pause*) You know, I went down on the Sunday after they buried him – just to see where the old hunter had ended up.

Annie Did you approve?

Flora It's a nice little churchyard there in the mother village. I like to think he's at peace now – close to the old, mellow stone church tower – very English.

Annie That's nice.

Flora I bought a him bunch of red roses from the shop by the church gate, and left them on his grave. There were two other wreaths from the funeral there – wax ones, from his sister and a nephew. D'you know, he'd never mentioned his family to me.

Annie Sounds as though he was as close with his thoughts as you are.

Flora Yes, perhaps we were two of a kind in a peculiar sort of way. Anyway, I walked back in the sunshine over the heath – that cheered me up a bit. Purple as far as the eye could see – and the birches and the green bracken – and the air filled with the scent of heather and pine ...

Richard Brownlow enters from the street

Richard Hello, I see Flora's expounding on the splendours of the local countryside again.

Annie Richard, you've just broken the spell.

Richard What spell?

Annie Flora was getting all maudlin about Mr Foreshaw.

Richard I'd like to have met him – he seemed quite a character.

Flora He was. You should have seen inside his bungalow.

Annie They auctioned off his belongings shortly after he died. I remember people coming past the post office carrying all sorts of weird things – one boy with antlers on his head!

Flora I'd have loved to have gone along and picked up a memento or two, but I couldn't get away.

Richard You've got nothing of his?

Flora He always said he'd like to leave me something, a book perhaps – but never mind ... (*Mock serious*) Now what can I do for you, sir? Postage stamps? Postal Orders?

Richard You can put your knitting down, and take Mavis and me off and away into this earthly paradise you describe so well.

Flora Is it closing time already?

Richard Near enough.

Annie She was miles away.

Flora I'll just have to cash up. Can you wait?

Annie We've had a very busy day up until half an hour ago. We were just relaxing.

Richard How will the new telegraph office up the road affect you?

Annie I don't know – take some trade away I suppose. But it's not due to open till later in the year.

Richard *(To Flora)* I'll be over the road in the *Fox & Pelican* – having a coffee with Mavis.

Annie Nothing stronger I hope.

Richard Well, maybe a small nip of brandy in it.

Flora Richard Brownlow, if we have to carry you home ...

Richard I'll buy you one too, then you won't notice!

Flora Show him the door, Annie! *(To Richard)* I'll be over shortly.

Richard *(On his way out)* Where are you taking us today?

Flora To a place called Gibbet Hill, where they used to string up local murderers – and if you don't behave yourself, I'll string you up too!

Scene 16

In the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office

Walter and Emily are having a terrible row

Walter Chapman You're nothing but a common whore, woman. A strumpet.

Emily Chapman No, Walter!

Walter Chapman Years ago you'd be taken out and stoned.

Emily Chapman Walter, the children!

Walter Chapman They knew how to deal with harlots in those days. You bring shame to this house, woman.

Emily Chapman The children will be listening.

Walter Chapman Damn the children, and damn you!

Emily Chapman Walter, I've been faithful to you.

Walter Chapman Faithful? You're here in Letty's place – how can you be faithful? Tricked into marrying you, I was. Tricked then and tricked now!

Emily Chapman Walter ...

Walter Chapman Don't you Walter me – you cheap slut – I'll teach you ...

He is about to strike her when his brother Ernest enters and holds him

Ernest Chapman Brother, stop! For God's sake.

Emily Chapman Ernest, he's mad – he's trying to kill me!

Walter Chapman Kill? Not I. The Lord will repay. He will judge. Only He.

Ernest Chapman Quite so, brother, quite so. You must calm yourself or it will lead to something tragic.

Walter Chapman She has been unfaithful to me.

Emily Chapman When! – won't you tell me when?

Ernest Chapman I believe you are mistaken, Walter. I believe you are suffering under a delusion.

Walter Chapman So—even you would label me mad.

Ernest Chapman You have no right to treat your wife in this way.

Walter Chapman Even you would bind me and put me away.

Ernest Chapman Nobody's binding you, Walter, or putting you away. But you have no right to revenge yourself on your wife, even if what you say is true. As you have said, 'The Lord will judge—the Lord will repay'.

Walter Chapman (*To Emily*) It is only that text which has saved you from having a bullet through you.

Ernest Chapman Walter! Brother. Come with me and let this sorry woman alone. Maybe it would be best if you separate for a while—for a few weeks perhaps. Otherwise I fear the worst.

Walter Chapman They separated me from Letty! Made us live half a world apart. Parted us for ever.

Ernest Chapman Come.

Walter Chapman (*Hissing*) 'To be, or not to be ... '

Ernest Chapman Walter—this way—with me.

He leads Walter off, motioning for Emily to stay behind. She sinks in a chair, sobbing

Emily Chapman Letty's real to him, I'm not. How can I fight against a ghost? How can I?

Child's Voice (*from offstage*) Mumma! (*Louder*) Mumma!

Emily Chapman (*Wiping her eyes*) Yes, Lulu—what is it?

Child's Voice Are you all right, mumma?

Emily Chapman (*Rising*) Yes, dear, mumma's all right. Don't cry—mumma's all right. Back to bed now. Back to bed. Everything's all right—till the morning.

She exits towards the voice

Scene 17

At Flora's lodgings with Mrs Parkhurst

Mrs Parkhurst is giving Flora a 'talking to'

Mrs Parkhurst Now then, young lady, what time of night do you call this? A quarter past eleven.

Flora I'm very sorry, Mrs Parkhurst.

Mrs Parkhurst And arriving unchaperoned with a young man I've never seen before. Richard, did you call him?

Flora He very kindly offered to walk with me ...

Mrs Parkhurst From the public house?

Flora No, it was ...

Mrs Parkhurst There was one of those dance things there tonight, wasn't there?

Flora I believe so, but I went to a lecture at the Congregational Hall.

Mrs Parkhurst (*A little deflated*) Oh. There'd be no dancing there.

Flora No, it was a London author talking about his novels. Very good.

Mrs Parkhurst He finished later than expected then?

Flora The audience kept asking questions – they wouldn't let him get away.

Mrs Parkhurst I've had to sit up waiting for you. Eleven o'clock we agreed. Mr Parkhurst went to bed – he has to get up for work in the morning.

Flora I'm sorry. It won't happen again.

Mrs Parkhurst Let's say no more then. You're a good girl and you help me around the house as best you can. Better than the men lodgers I've had before, any rate.

Flora Thank you.

Mrs Parkhurst The usual for breakfast at the usual time then. I'll say good night.

Flora Good night, Mrs Parkhurst.

Mrs Parkhurst (*As she exits*) And don't forget to put the guard in front of the fire.

Flora No, I won't Mrs Parkhurst.

Scene 18

Sir Frederick Pollock meets with Conan Doyle

Walking along the Portsmouth turnpike at Hindhead

Pollock Ah, Doyle – good morning. Out taking the air I see?

Doyle Making a virtue of necessity, Sir Frederick. I have to go down to the village to send off some wires.

Pollock Dashed inconvenient, eh? Sooner they open the telegraph office at Hindhead the better – especially for you – be just across the road from your back gate.

Doyle I really don't mind the walk in this sort of weather.

Pollock Trouble with our 'green and pleasant land' – this sort of weather's all too rare. Roads become a mudbath – and it seems an impertinence to take the horse out for such a short ride.

Doyle You could try a bicycle.

Pollock At my age? I think not.

Doyle Or invest in an automobile. They seem to be almost reliable these days.

Pollock Trouble with this area, Doyle, is that it's becoming too accessible, and the automobile will make it more so. Take your life in your hands crossing the Portsmouth road now. Mad fools driving them, got no common sense or courtesy for others.

Doyle I have a mind possibly to buy one myself next year.

Pollock Huh!

Doyle Which I hope to drive with both common sense and courtesy.

Pollock Well, no offence, but I'm beginning to think of moving somewhere more peaceful. Poor old Tyndall's to blame. Made such a song and dance about how healthy it was to live here that everybody wanted to come.

Doyle England's 'little Switzerland.'

Pollock That's what the guide books say. More's the pity.

Doyle Well, I must continue on my way – to assail our efficient young Grayshott postmistress with yet more work.

Pollock I wonder what she'll do when Hindhead opens?

Doyle Considerably less, I should think.

They part, with appropriate farewells, in separate directions

Scene 19

In Grayshott Post Office, soon after

Flora is about to take a half day off

Annie Seems strange here without Mrs Chapman around.

Flora Bit more than 'just a lovers' tiff' this time, it seems. They're saying in the village she's gone for good, with the children.

Annie I heard that she wanted to come back, but Mr Chapman wouldn't let her.

Flora Which Mr Chapman?

Annie Our Mr Chapman—her husband.

Flora That sounds sensible to me.

Annie Sensible? A man not wanting his wife and children back?

Flora I used to live here remember. I've seen things you haven't.

Annie What sort of things?

Flora I can't tell you that—I promised Mrs Chapman I wouldn't.

Annie You've got me all curious now.

Flora Well you'll have to stay curious! It's my half day, and I'm off to take Mavis and Richard for a walk over Ludshott Common.

Flora starts to put her hat and coat on

Annie Rather you than me. My Arthur would run a mile at the thought—'walking in the wilderness,' he'd call it.

Flora But Mavis and Richard are from London. They need to clean their lungs of all that city smoke. Your Arthur doesn't have to.

Annie Nor do you.

Flora No—but I enjoy it for it's own sake. I'll see you tomorrow.

Annie Tomorrow never comes.

Flora makes a 'face' at her and goes out to the street

Enjoy your walk. *(Pause)* I wonder what it is she can't tell me? Oh well, let's get these letters sorted while it's quiet. Pim-li-co—Nor-wich—Ye-o-vil—Willes-den—Slough, like a snake. ~~*(Willie enters from outside)* Ugh, no peace for the wicked.~~

~~**Willie** It's a long way to Mr Whitaker's.~~

~~**Annie** Grayshott Hall? It's only a mile and a half—and all on the flat.~~

~~**Willie** Seems a lot further.~~

~~**Annie** Well, you can have a rest now—nothing else to go out for the moment. And I can get on with this sorting.~~

~~**Willie** Not for long. That man who sends long ones is on his way—I saw him coming.~~

~~**Annie** The man who sends long ones?~~

Conan Doyle enters

~~**Willie** *[Exiting indoors]* Him.~~

Doyle Good day. Was that our earnest postmistress I saw hurrying away just now?

Annie Yes sir, it's her half day.

Doyle Then I hope you are equally qualified to send wires.

Annie I am sir. Fully trained now.

Doyle Good. I have three here – one of them is quite long I'm afraid. To my publisher.

He hands them to her

Annie Shall I do the short ones first, sir? Let's just make sure I can read them. (*Starts to read the first*) This GBS—is it a place?

Doyle (*Laughs*) No, it's George Bernard Shaw. You may remember him—Mr Shaw—lived here in the village until last year—red beard, on a crutch, always talking. The recipient will understand well enough who I mean just by the initials.

The lights fade on the scene

Scene 20

On Ludshott Common, soon after

Flora, Richard and Mavis walk, the girls either side on Richard's arms

Flora Remember the first day you came into the post office, Richard, and I sold you a post card?

Richard Very well. I had to write home and tell mother I'd arrived safely.

Mavis And I remember being at home with her when she received it.

Flora The view you chose was taken from about here, I should think.

Richard Yes, I believe you're right.

Mavis But listen to the birds, and smell the heather! They weren't on the post card!

Richard It's magnificent! And what are those blue hills in the distance?

Flora The South Downs—see that gap?—it's where the turnpike to Portsmouth goes through. D'you know, one of the men in the village actually rode his 'penny-farthing' there and back in a day, a few years ago?

Richard Never!

Flora And over there—see those other hills, nearer?—that's Selborne hanger, where Gilbert White the naturalist lived.

Mavis You seem to know everything, Flora.

Richard What's that large patch of red blight among the heather over there?

Flora Ah, that's dodder. It's a parasite and drags the plants around it down to earth.

Mavis How gruesome!

Flora If I were a novelist, I'd write a book called 'Dodder'.

Richard You would? Why?

Flora It would be the story of a man or a woman—probably a woman—of a fine, sensitive nature, married to someone who was strong, coarse and encroaching by nature.

Mavis The dodder!

Flora I would tell how, in time, the heather person shrank and withered, while the dodder one fattened and prospered.

Richard The villain of the piece.

Flora No! The dodder cannot help being dodder—it was made that way. The dodder man has no evil intentions—he may even be kindly disposed. It just happens that his presence ruins the heather.

Mavis He thrives and becomes more and more bumptious and important ...

Richard Probably a stockbroker, with a white waistcoat and a thick gold watch-chain.

Mavis A well-respected man in society circles.

Flora While she, on the other hand, just withers away into a wraith of a woman.

Richard Jolly fine. I shall write this story.

Mavis You shall not! This is Flora's story.

Richard (*A little hurt*) You don't think I can handle such a delicate tale?

Mavis Flora knows all about people.

Flora I'm not sure I do. I've been told I prefer places to people.

Richard (*Seizing her hand*) Nonsense, you shall do it! (*Swinging her round in a waltz*)
Flora knows about it all. She knows! She knows!

Mavis (*Laughing*) Richard! Stop it – what will people think?

Richard But there's no-one around, is there. There's no-one for miles around.

*Bob Pikesley enters and looks at the dancing couple blankly –
Flora suddenly sees him and stops in embarrassment*

Flora Oh – hello Bob.

Bob Pikesley A'ternoon.

Flora We were just – admiring the view from here.

Bob Pikesley I see.

Flora These are friends of mine – from London.

Bob Pikesley Oh ar.

Flora Richard and Mavis.

Bob Pikesley Pleased to meet 'ee.

Flora We were going up to the pine clump.

Bob Pikesley Be rain afore you get back.

Flora Surely not.

Bob Pikesley Same as before.

Flora But there's not a cloud in the sky.

Bob Pikesley See if I'm not right. (*He walks past them to exit*) Helpless crittur!

Richard Who was he?

Flora Bob Pikesley. He keeps cows down in the valley. Lives with his sister.

Mavis Sounds like he's the local weather prophet too.

Flora I've never known him wrong yet. Perhaps we'd better get on.

Richard 'Some are weather-wise, some are otherwise.'

Flora Who's that?

Richard Benjamin Franklin.

Mavis Don't say Richard's found someone you haven't read, Flora.

Flora I don't live among the bookshops in London like you do. I have to rely on
Madame Warr's lending library across the road.

Richard Then why not come to live in London?

Mavis Yes, why not?

Richard Think of all the theatres and museums we could visit.

Mavis And the picture galleries – you'd love those.

Richard And the country outings on Sundays.

Flora But I'm already in the country. And what would I do for work?

Mavis Oh, we could find you work, couldn't we Richard.

Flora I've no qualifications – nothing on paper.

Richard A correspondence course – with the Civil Service college – that's what you need. Only a guinea, and you'd pass the examinations with flying colours.

Flora With my education? Do you think so?

Mavis You pick things up so quickly.

Richard I'm certain. I'll make a point of sending you the papers on it when we get home.

Flora I'm not sure.

Mavis You'll love it in London, Flora. *(She starts coughing)* Oh, excuse me.

Richard I thought you'd lost that cough.

Mavis So did I. *(Coughing again)*

Flora Mavis, are you all right?

Richard She's had it for a while. I thought the fresh air out here had cured it.

Flora It's probably the smell from that patch of burnt heather over there. It can catch in your throat sometimes.

Richard You're probably right.

Mavis *(Only slightly recovered)* I'm better now.

Richard We'd better get back to the house. Early start tomorrow.

Flora Back to London.

Richard Back to the city smoke. Until our next weekend off.

Flora When will that be?

Richard Not too long, I hope. But before that, you must visit us. You don't know what you're missing if you've never seen the city.

Mavis Yes, really Flora.

Flora *(Dubious)* Well – I'll see if Mr Chapman can give me time off.

Richard It's decided then. You've shown us the wonders of the countryside, and we shall show you the marvels of the city.

(As the three exit arm in arm)

We'll ride along gas-lit streets on top of a bus ...

Mavis Eat roast chestnuts and look in all the shop windows ...

Richard Show you the Central Telegraph Office in Threadneedle Street, where all your messages come from ...

Flora Oh yes, "T.S." we call it.

Mavis And take you to ... *(Coughing again)* Oh dear, I do wish I could get rid of this silly cough. It's so embarrassing.

Scene 21

In Crossways Road, Grayshott

Walter and Ernest Chapman meet

Ernest Chapman Good morning to you, brother. Are you well?

Walter Chapman Never felt better, Ernest.

Ernest Chapman Glad to hear it.

Walter Chapman You sound unsure.

Ernest Chapman No, no—I am sure. I am glad to hear that you say you are well.

Walter Chapman But I still sense a reservation in your voice.

Ernest Chapman You do?

Walter Chapman Let me assure you. The problems of the past are over. I am at peace with myself.

Ernest Chapman It is not I who need the assurance—it is your wife. Emily is convinced her life is at risk if she comes back to you. Not to mention the children.

Walter Chapman She has a vivid imagination, brother.

Ernest Chapman Oh, she has no need to imagine. If a quarter of the things she says are true, she has no need to imagine. How can she be sure this peace will last?

Walter Chapman It will last. Trade is good—I am healthy—I am content. I am respected in the community, am I not?

Ernest Chapman For your skills in carpentry, there is no-one your equal in the area.

Walter Chapman My work is even in the church. The new altar.

Ernest Chapman Then you are truly Established in your carpentry. But what has Dr Lyndon to say about your physical situation?

Walter Chapman What should he have to say? A healthy man has no need of a physician.

Ernest Chapman Indeed. But I would be happier to hear the physician say so.

Walter Chapman Then you had better ask Dr Lyndon yourself. As far as I am concerned, I have no reason to waste his time with a visit. Ah, it must be Tuesday—here's the man from the *Herald*.

Ernest Chapman You do not convince me, brother.

Walter Chapman No? But he comes searching for news every week at this time.

Ernest Chapman That's not what I meant, as well you know. I am concerned to know if your wife and children can safely return home now.

William Sillick approaches

Sillick Good morning, gentlemen.

Ernest Chapman (*Sharply*) Morning, Sillick. (*To Walter*) Well, we shall talk more of this.

Walter Chapman You are concerning yourself over nothing. There is no problem.

Ernest Chapman I hope to God you are right. (*To Sillick*) Good day. Mr Sillick.

Ernest departs

Sillick Have I interrupted a family meeting?

Walter Chapman My brother Ernest was enquiring after my health, that is all.

Sillick I see.

Walter Chapman Which is excellent. Excellent. And now you are here to see Miss Timms?

Sillick Ah—

Walter Chapman You do not imagine that I was unaware of the particular interest you take in my employee?

Sillick An entirely innocent relationship, Mr Chapman, I assure you.

Walter Chapman Yes. Maybe. She does seem to attract unusual friends. Not entirely appropriate for a person with her — responsibilities.

Sillick I'm sorry if ...

Walter Chapman Do not encourage her to tell you things which are — better left undisclosed.

Sillick Indeed not. I fully respect the confidential nature of her job.

Walter Chapman Her job — yes. Yes, her job.

Sillick I assumed that was what you were referring to.

Walter Chapman Her position — in the post office. Yes. It has been... It is... We must naturally uphold the regulations — as laid down by the postmaster-general.

Sillick I fully understand that, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman Good. Good.

Sillick Have no fear — I am the model of discretion in my reporting of such affairs.

Scene 22

Mrs Parkhurst's house, some weeks later

Mrs Parkhurst is doing housework as Flora enters

Flora I'm home, Mrs Parkhurst. You're busy as ever, I see.

Mrs Parkhurst Seven children at home and a husband to look after, young Flora — doesn't give you much time for yourself.

Flora You must feel tired.

Mrs Parkhurst I do. I don't believe I've sat down a moment all day, except for meals. And the minister came over to see us today, since we never get to see him at the chapel in town — so that was extra work.

Flora I hope the children were good.

Mrs Parkhurst They were good, and well they might be. He insisted on having them share the dish of cakes I'd made for his tea.

Flora Oh dear.

Mrs Parkhurst 'Suffer the little children to come unto me,' he said — then he blessed them all and sent them off to play.

Flora Ah.

Mrs Parkhurst But I was glad he came. Mr Parkhurst will see him on Sunday, being as how it's one of his Chapel Sundays, but I wanted to tell him first.

Flora I see. (*Uncertainly*) Tell him what?

Mrs Parkhurst Well you'd better know, for it'll be obvious soon enough. I did think I'd done with it all, at my time of life, but — I'm expecting again.

Flora (*Not sure what to say*) Oh.

Mrs Parkhurst I know it's God's will and I must be patient—but I do dread it starting to show. All the clothes I had are either worn out or given away. And where we'll find the money to buy new, I just don't know. Mr Parkhurst, bless him, has never had a day out of work in his life, but ... *(She is near to tears)*

Flora I'm sure you'll cope. *(Trying to return to normality)* I bought you the things you asked for in the village.

Mrs Parkhurst That's very good of you, dear. You're a great help to me.

Flora It's all right. I'll be in my room if you need me.

Flora tries to exit, but Mrs Parkhurst holds her in conversation

Mrs Parkhurst I remember when I was your age. We lived over by Selborne then. You and your walking—you should see the Hanger at Selborne when the primroses are out! And the hop-picking season—the whole family would pack up and go off in the donkey-cart to Farnham, bag and baggage, leaving grandmother at home to look after the animals. 'Twas a regular holiday for us children—happiest days of my life.

Flora It sounds wonderful.

Mrs Parkhurst Mind, it was hard work during the day, but we had plenty of fun in the evenings. Now all this riff-raff from the towns does it, and nobody who thinks themselves respectable goes any more.

Flora What a shame.

Mrs Parkhurst Used to shut the schools for us to go hop-picking, they did—but not now—times have changed. Well, I must get Mr Parkhurst's tea ready for him. There's a fire lit in your room and I'll bring the supper tray up at the usual time.

Flora Thank you—that's very kind.

Mrs Parkhurst You'll not be going out tonight?

Flora No, I have some books to read.

Mrs Parkhurst I'm not sure what's worse—going out with the wrong people or not going out at all. Still, one day you'll be married and then you'll learn what's what.

Flora smiles thinly at her and exits – the lights fade on the scene

Scene 23

In Grayshott Post Office, some time later

Annie is on duty – Isobel has come in for a chat

Isobel Annie, have you heard? You missed such a scene yesterday—with Millie.

Annie *(Sorting mail and not paying full attention)* No, Aunt Izzy, I haven't—what's Millie been up to?

Isobel It's her Sam—he's jilted her—can you imagine?

Annie Sam? I didn't think he had it in him.

Isobel Oh that's not fair, Annie. Poor Millie's heartbroken.

Annie 'Better a bad husband than no husband at all,' as they say.

Isobel We were all there, trying to console her—she was borrowing handkerchiefs from everybody ...

Annie Sounds a bit unhygienic.

Isobel Then suddenly she jumped up, threw her handkerchief away ...

Annie Whose handkerchief?

Isobel Listen, this is serious – she jumped up and shouted, ‘I’ll make him suffer for this – I’ll breach him! – I’ll breach him!’

Annie She’s been reading too many newspapers. People are bringing breach-of-promise cases just to sell the story these days.

Isobel Annie, you’re being unromantic.

Annie Well I don’t suppose Sam even *made* a promise.

Isobel You don’t go around with a man unless he’s promised to you, do you. At least you shouldn’t.

Walter Chapman enters from the house, with woodworking tools in hand

Annie Now then, Aunt Isobel, did you want some stamps?

Isobel Stamps? (*Sees Walter and understands*) Oh, no – no, thank you.

Annie I’ll probably see you on Saturday then, at the dance – with Arthur.

Isobel Yes, I expect so. Thank you. I’ll see you there, then. Goodbye. (*She exits*)

Walter Chapman Miss Symonds.

Annie Yes, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman I must see Miss Timms as soon as she arrives.

Annie I’ll tell her as soon as she gets here – she shouldn’t be long. Can I say what it’s about?

Walter Chapman A private matter, Miss Symonds, a private matter. (*Hissing*) T’were well it were done quickly. (*To Annie*) Have we been busy today?

Annie Yes, fairly busy.

Walter Chapman Good, good. Let us hope then. Let us hope. (*He exits to the house*)

Annie (*To herself*) What on earth’s all that about? (*The telegraph starts to tinkle*) Oh bother – the telegraph. (*She goes to it*) Message from ‘T. S.’

Flora enters from the street while Annie is off transcribing the message

Flora (*Calls to Annie as she takes off her coat and hat*) Is that today’s war report coming in?

Annie (*Off*) No, it’s not.

Flora (*Listening to the tinkling of the message*) It just said ‘HINDHEAD’.

Annie (*Off*) Yes – it’s about the new office there. Addressed to Mr Chapman.

Flora What does it say?

The message stops, and Annie emerges

Annie You’d better read it. (*Hands the message sheet to Flora*)

Flora (*Reading*) I see – I suppose it was predictable.

Annie Does it mean you’ll have to leave? That would be terrible.

Flora Most of our customers come from Hindhead. Once there’s a telegraph office there ...

Annie Can’t you apply to work in it? That wouldn’t mean moving.

Flora We’ll have to see. I’d better put this in an envelope and take it to Mr Chapman.

Annie And try to pretend we haven’t seen it! Silly isn’t it? Oh, he wanted to see you anyway, as soon as you arrived.

Flora Probably about the same thing. It says ‘further to our recent letter.’

Annie Good luck then. He was whispering bits from Macbeth when he asked for you.

Flora Something ominous, like 'Toil and trouble'?

Annie No, not that exactly – but there aren't any good bits in Macbeth, are there.

Flora smiles at her and exits to the house

'Double, double, toil and trouble;'

'Fire burn and cauldron bubble.'

'When shall we three meet again?'

Richard enters to hear this

Richard 'In thunder, lightning, or in rain?'

Annie Very appropriate, Richard. You sound how I feel.

Richard Have I arrived at a bad time? I was hoping for a quiet word with Flora.

Annie She's having a 'quiet word' with Mr Chapman at the moment.

Richard Nothing serious, I hope.

Annie Nothing she's done, if that's what you mean.

Richard That's a relief anyway. How long will she be?

Annie How long is a piece of post office string?

Richard With or without sealing wax?

Annie That's better – at least you're smiling now.

Richard I confess I don't feel like it.

Annie You too? Bad news?

Richard I thought I'd better come and tell Flora in person.

Annie Oh dear – what's that?

Flora enters

Flora Richard! I wasn't expecting you here again so soon. (*She goes to him – they almost embrace – Flora senses his mood*) Is there something ... ?

Richard (*Confidentially*) Can we find somewhere to talk?

Flora Well, not at my lodgings – my room's got a bed in it, and that would never do.

Richard (*Half laughing*) No – no it wouldn't, would it.

Flora We could take a walk down the street, to the turnpike. There's not too many people about at the moment.

(*To Annie*) Can you look after the office for a few minutes, Annie?

Annie I might as well get used to it.

Flora grabs her coat & hat again – she and Richard exit to the street

Telegram boys enter from inside

~~**Willie** (*mimicking Flora*) ... that would never do!~~

~~**Alf** D'you think that's what she says to Bob Pikesley too?~~

~~**Willie** Bob Pikesley wouldn't know what she was talking about.~~

~~**Annie** And neither do you. I've told you before – out of the office unless you're called.~~

~~**Willie** Yes, Miss Symonds.~~

~~**Alf** Didn't something come in just now?~~

~~**Annie** Nothing that needs delivering. Now be off with you.~~

~~**Willie** But we've been waiting for ages with nothing to do. (*Boys exit to room*)~~

~~**Annie** (*Calling after them*) Seems you'll have even less to do when Hindhead opens.~~

Scene 24

In Crossways Road, immediately after

Flora and Richard promenade during this scene

Richard What did she mean, 'might as well get used to it'?

Flora Oh, I'll tell you later. How's Mavis?

Richard That's one of the things I came to tell you about – she's not at all well.

Flora The cough?

Richard The doctor couldn't be sure, but he suspects tuberculosis.

Flora Oh, Richard, I am sorry. Poor Mavis.

Richard He says she shouldn't stay in London this winter.

Flora Just as she was doing so well in her new job too. Isn't she frightened?

Richard Disappointed – not frightened. She's certain the doctor's made a mistake.

Flora But you don't think so.

Richard (*Shakes his head grimly. Then, half laughing*) He wondered if she could be moved to the South of France for a while.

Flora Your poor mother could never afford that.

Richard Of course not. Bournemouth is the best we can manage.

Flora I see.

Richard At first she flatly refused to be 'packed off' as she called it.

Flora But she is going?

Richard Of course she is. These things are taken seriously today. We've told her she must stay in a sanatorium there until she's cured.

Flora But the money.

Richard Our Aunt Maggie has a friend there – a trained nurse. Mavis can stay with her for three months. We'll find the money for that.

Flora And then?

Richard Then? By then it will be Spring.

There is a silence

Flora And you came down from London especially to tell me this. It was good of you.

Richard Not just that. (*Pause*) I also wanted to say it may be some time before I see you again, Flora. With Mavis so ill ...

Flora She must be your first priority, of course.

Richard There'll be no holidays for me, not even weekends, until she's better. And what with mother to look after as well ...

Flora Poor Richard.

Richard Poor in every sense, I'm afraid. One day you'll read in the newspapers, "Young man in moneylender's clutches," and you'll find you know him.

Flora I shall not – you've far more sense than that.

Richard I hope so – but at the moment I feel as if I'm trying to climb out of a pit – and I keep getting knocked back down again just when I'm at the top.

Flora Things are sure to get better. "Never flinch" – remember?

Richard Flinch? I wish I had your good country wisdom to fall back on. I feel it will always be like this for me from now on – I can't see an end to it.

Flora Richard ...

Richard I can never marry you – you know that, don't you Flora?

Flora Marry?

Richard Not while I have to borrow money just to live.

Flora (*Hurt, but not flinching*) But – you don't want to marry anyone, do you? And perhaps by the time you do you'll have made a fortune.

Richard Flora, I didn't mean ...

Flora It's all right, Richard. I understand.

Richard I didn't mean it that way.

Flora You must keep an eye on the time. Which train are you getting back?

Richard Five minutes past the hour. Look, I'm ...

Flora Then you should be going. It's a long walk to the station.

Richard Yes. Yes – I'll write of course – and so will Mavis.

Flora And I shall write back.

Richard Thank you – I'll appreciate that. Well – goodbye then, Flora.

Flora Goodbye, Richard.

They hold hands for a while at arms length, then Richard turns and walks off.

Flora (*Softly, after him*) Goodbye.

Flora waits, looking where he has gone. Suddenly he returns, but stops before reaching her.

Richard Goodbye, Flora.

He thinks of holding her, then turns and hurries off again

Flora And I never even told him my news.

Flora turns and exits in the opposite direction

Scene 25

In Grayshott Post Office, at the same time

Annie is still on duty. Walter Chapman enters

Walter Chapman Has Miss Timms left?

Annie She's out – handling a customer's enquiry, Mr Chapman.

Walter Chapman I see. (*Hissing*) To him that hath shall be given. (*To Annie*) She has no doubt informed you of the forthcoming changes.

Annie Hindhead, you mean.

Walter Chapman It is most unlikely that the remaining telegraph traffic will warrant retaining two staff here. I have advised Miss Timms to look elsewhere for employment.

Annie She'll be sorry to go.

Walter Chapman She at least has no roots in this village as you have, Miss Symonds. I am sure she will find her feet equally well in another location. Yes. (*Pause*) Now I must see to the house. My wife is returning with the children this evening.

Annie (*In surprise*) Mrs Chapman?

Walter Chapman Yes. They have been too long away. Far too long. (*Hissing as he exits*) Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

Scene 26 [CUT]

~~In Crossways Road, Grayshott~~

Winifred Storr and "Gee" Leuchars are walking in the street

~~Winifred~~ Mr Terry came over last night and taught mother how to ride her new bicycle.

~~Gee~~ How did he do that?

~~Winifred~~ Put a broomstick through under the saddle and used it to steer her round the garden.

~~Gee~~ What fun! My mother hasn't dared try yet. Your family always gets to do things first—you've got one of those Kodaks now, haven't you?

~~Winifred~~ I'll take a snap-shot of you if you like. You can pose for me.

~~Gee~~ Not me!

~~Winifred~~ Famous member of the local girls cricket team.

~~Gee~~ Just because you beat us last week!

~~Winifred~~ And you had Mary Doyle on your side too.

~~Gee~~ So?

~~Winifred~~ Her father plays cricket almost better than he writes books.

~~Gee~~ I got more runs than she did.

~~Winifred~~ The whole team only got 17 runs!

~~Gee~~ Anyway, Mr Whitaker's offered us his gardens for practice next Saturday, and strawberries and cream afterwards.

~~Winifred~~ You need it. Mrs Whitaker brought three brace of partridges round to us the other day.

~~Gee~~ Perhaps she thinks you're starving poor ...

~~Winifred~~ Starving? You should see the spread our mother put out when Miss James came round for tea last week.

~~Gee~~ *(Carrying on her teasing)* You'll all be in the workhouse before you know it.

~~Winifred~~ *(Ignoring her)* And I played the piano to her. She said I was very good.

~~Gee~~ Better than my sister on the violin, I hope.

~~Winifred~~ I'm going up to London with mother for a lesson tomorrow.

~~Gee~~ Which train?

~~Winifred~~ The eleven o'clock.

~~Gee~~ I'll be on that too.

~~Winifred~~ Will you? Where are you going—anywhere exciting?

~~Gee~~ To the dentist!

~~Winifred~~ Oh, poor Gee!

~~Gee~~ I'll bring a good book with me.

~~Winifred~~ Me too. What are you reading now?

~~Gee~~ 'A Desert Drama,' by you know who.

~~Both~~ *(Together)* A. Conan Doyle.

They exit, still talking

Scene 27

By the new Hindhead Post Office

William Sillick and Conan Doyle enter

Sillick Well, Mr Doyle, how do you like the new telegraph office here? I should think you could pop over and back while your breakfast egg is boiling now.

Doyle It is certainly more convenient.

Sillick Could hardly be closer.

Doyle Have to get used to the new staff, of course. And no more teasing the young Grayshott postmistress.

Sillick Miss Timms? She's not transferring up here then? She hadn't told me.

Doyle Apparently not. An interesting lady that.

Sillick Yes – You think so?

Doyle Not much conversation, at least not with me, yet one perceives a certain depth of spirit within her.

Sillick Well, that is your line of business is it not – the spirit world?

Doyle A certain feeling of – mystery.

Sillick A case for Holmes to solve perhaps.

Doyle I do write other works you know, Mr Sillick.

Lights fade

Scene 28

Mrs Parkhurst's house, some days later

The baby has arrived – Flora gets her first look

Flora She's lovely. What are you calling her?

Mrs Parkhurst Elsie. She's my little Lammas lamb.

Flora Hello, Elsie.

Mrs Parkhurst There, there. You'll have some nicey-picey dilly-dilly-water in a min-min when brother Herbie comes back from the chemie.

Flora Mr Parkhurst tells me you didn't have an easy time.

Mrs Parkhurst Two doctors and the district nurse – and the chloroform. But I kept telling myself, "I know my redeemer liveth," and *(to the baby)* you were no trouble in the end, were you. No you weren't.

Flora What do the other children think of her?

Mrs Parkhurst *(To the baby)* They love you, don't they. Yes they do. And big sister Mabel's going to give you a nice bathie-pathie when she gets homie-pomie, isn't she.

Flora It's nice to see you taking a rest for once.

Mrs Parkhurst First I've had since Ivy was born eight years ago, and I mean to make the most of it, I can tell you. It's the last I'll get of this sort. *(To the baby)* Yes, you're the last – there won't be any more like you, will there. Oh no there won't. *(To Flora)* I'll make sure of that.

Flora *(A little embarrassed, just smiles and nods)*

Mrs Parkhurst So you're leaving Grayshott soon. Where are you going?

Flora I don't know yet. I'm looking for a vacancy at another post office.

Mrs Parkhurst Still want to be a working girl, then. Not settling down to get married – and have babies of your own.

Flora I haven't found 'Mr Right' yet.

Mrs Parkhurst What happened to that Richard?

Flora Oh – we keep in touch.

Lights fade

Scene 29

In Grayshott Post Office, a few days later

Annie is on duty – Emily Chapman is with her

Annie I'm glad you're here for Flora's last day, Mrs Chapman.

Emily Chapman (*Pensively*) Yes. I wonder what memories Grayshott will have for her.

Annie Oh, I think she's enjoyed it here. Different to anywhere she's been before, she says.

Emily Chapman Different. I imagine it has been.

Annie All the hills and heather – she grew up among clay and cornfields – 'lark rise' country she called it. I remember her telling me once the air round here went to her head like wine.

Emily Chapman I wonder. Did she also tell you why she left the lodgings she had with us here?

Annie (*A little embarrassed*) No, she never did.

Emily Chapman Not a hint?

Annie No – she never told me, and I never asked.

Emily Chapman I see. (*A pause*) Has she heard any news of her brother yet?

Annie Edwin? He's still posted as 'missing.' She must be worried, but she doesn't let it show.

Emily Chapman 'Never flinch.'

Annie You've heard her say that too.

Emily Chapman I've had reason to remember it these last few months.

Lights fade

Scene 30

Farewells in Grayshott

Flora moves from character to character around the 'stage' – the light follows her

Marion is twirling a bag of sweets closed for Flora to take away with her

Marion It won't be the same without you, Flora.

Flora Nor you, Marion. I'm sure Annie will help you with any more speeches you have to make.

Marion Oh, they say it's not going to be my turn now for ages. (*Pensively*) I hope they liked the one I did.

Flora I'm sure they loved it.

Marion (*Handing her the sweets*) These are to keep you going on the train journey.

Flora Thank you – it's quite a long way. (*Looking for her purse*) How much are they?

Marion Flora! They're a present.

Flora That's very kind. I'll remember you with each sweet I eat.

Marion Just so long as you also remember me when you're rich and famous.

Flora (*Laughing*) And the moon turns blue and all the rivers run uphill. Goodbye Marion.

Marion Goodbye Flora. Bless you.

~~**Flora** Alf and Willie—my two best messenger boys.~~

Marion Are you going far?

Flora Perhaps to Bournemouth.

Marion That's by the seaside, isn't it?

Flora Yes, the seaside—another new experience for me.

Goodbye, Mr Chapman. It was very kind of you to take me on here.

Walter Chapman (*Carrying his carpenter's tools*) Goodbye, Miss Timms. (*Hissing*) Yes, parting is such sweet sorrow.

Flora Mrs Chapman.

Emily Chapman Flora—I'm ... (*she shakes her head, near tears*) I'm sorry ...

Flora There's no need, Mrs Chapman. Give my love to the children.

Emily Chapman Love? Yes, of course.

Flora Bob. Bob Pikesley!

Bob Pikesley They tells me you're a'going.

Flora Yes. I'm just off to the station.

Bob Pikesley On your two feet.

Flora It's the way I arrived, and it's the way I want to leave. The carter's taken my luggage.

Bob Pikesley Rain before you get there.

Flora I have my hat and coat.

Bob Pikesley Helpless crittur.

Flora Goodbye Mrs Parkhurst.

Mrs Parkhurst We'll meet again one day, I'm sure of that.

Flora I wish I was.

Mrs Parkhurst When Elsie's a grown girl, you've got children of your own, and I'm a grandmother several times over— we'll meet again.

Flora Goodbye Izzy. That's a lovely present you bought me. (*They embrace*)

Isobel I hope you like it—it's supposed to bring you luck.

Flora It will—I'm sure of it. And Annie. (*They embrace too*)

Annie (*A little tearfully*) Best-trained telegraph operator in the land.

Flora I'd have gone 'barmy on the crumpet' without you. Ly-ces-ter, War-ces-ter, Has-le-merry!

Annie You'll write, won't you.

Flora I might even send you a message on the telegraph.

Annie An electric letter!

Flora Keep writing the poetry.

Annie Oh, it's you that's the writer, not me.

Flora I wish I could believe that. Goodbye, Annie.

Flora is now alone

Goodbye Grayshott – heathery Grayshott. I came to you as a young girl of twenty-one, and I leave you nearly three years older – but any wiser? Perhaps Bob Pikesley's right – I'm a 'helpless crittur.' There's Annie and Izzy and the rest of them rushing to get married – but me? Coming up for my quarter century, and still on the shelf.

This is where I said goodbye to Richard – for the last time. I wonder if he'll ever – Or did he really not want to marry anyone? Who knows? Perhaps you're right dear Mr Foreshaw. 'He rides swiftest who rides alone.' There must be worse things in life than being single.

Come on now Flora, best foot forward – it's three miles to the station and you can beat the carter there yet. *(She exits)*

Scene 31

Inside the Chapman's accommodation at Grayshott Post Office

We hear Emily Chapman scream

Walter Chapman Whore, strumpet!

He holds a carpenter's chisel – there is blood on it and on him

Emily Chapman Walter – the baby! No!!

Walter Chapman *(Stabbing her repeatedly)* Your baby – not my baby – not Letty's baby.

He stabs her again

Emily Chapman *(Last gasp)* Walter!

Walter Chapman God forgive me – vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

Ernest Chapman rushes in

Ernest Chapman Brother, what have you done here?

He brushes Walter away and bends over Emily

Emily, can you hear me? *(To Annie off)* Fetch Dr Lyndon, and hurry.

I fear we are too late. Why did you do this, brother? You had no business to send her into Eternity.

Walter Chapman She was here in Letty's place.

Ernest Chapman If only you had lived in the love of God... It is your disbelief that has brought you to this sorry state.

Walter Chapman Why did she do it to me?

Ernest Chapman May God have mercy on your soul. Only the blood of Jesus will save you now.

Walter Chapman Why did she leave me? Why? Why?

Scene 32

Epilogue

Flora I was working in Yateley when I heard the news. If only I'd stayed, perhaps I could have ... but then, it might have been me, not poor Mrs Chapman who ...

Sillick The funeral of the late Mrs Chapman took place on Thursday afternoon, and was the occasion for an extraordinary manifestation of sympathy, this terrible tragedy having been the one topic of conversation in the whole neighbourhood during the week.

Ernest Walter was remanded to the next Winchester Assizes. At the trial he pleaded guilty to manslaughter, but on the request of his Counsel a plea of "Not guilty" was entered.

Sillick Dr. Worthington, medical superintendent of Hampshire County Asylum, reported that in his opinion the prisoner was insane at the time of the crime.

Ernest The jury returned a verdict of guilty but not responsible at law for his action. The judge ordered Walter to be detained during His Majesty's pleasure.

Flora Mr Chapman spent the rest of his life in Broadmoor. I often pictured him there, sitting with his head in his hands—as according to the newspaper reports he'd done throughout his trial.

Ernest Later he recovered his reason sufficiently to be allowed to work at his trade in the prison workshop—a white-haired old man, harmless and happy in his work. Much that had passed had been wiped from his memory, but he still had his delusions—and one of these was that his wife came frequently to visit him. She, poor soul, was at rest in Headley churchyard.

Scene 33

Flora's Wedding — 7th January 1903, at Twickenham

John Thompson is waiting at the altar, his back to the audience. The Wedding March starts — 'Flora' appears in wedding dress, walking slowly down the aisle.

Our character Flora views the scene.

Flora It's a wedding! But whose wedding? I don't recognise the man—the girl looks familiar. My height, my build, my features, my walk ... Mercy, it is me! My wedding. So I am to get married. But who to? It's not Richard—he's tall and well-built—this one's shorter, almost portly. And who's giving me away?—I can't quite make out. Not my father. Is Edwin there?—I feel sure he survived in South Africa, but I can't see him either. There seems to be nobody I know—but it is me.

So—Mrs Parkhurst, poor Mrs Chapman, dear Annie—I am to follow you down the aisle after all. Better a bad husband than no husband at all? But why should I think him bad? The dodder man—he has no evil intentions—he may even be kindly disposed. It just happens—that his presence stifles the heather person....

Never flinch, Flora. Remember, we are as we are made, and that's the end of it.

She takes the place of the bride in the aisle, and walks down to stand by John Thompson.

The music swells as she does so, and they walk offstage together, away from the audience

- 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 Grayshott, a village on the Hampshire/Surrey border.

Here she describes her surprise at entering a different world – a new settlement placed amid wild heather-clad hilltops compared with the old-established village set in the heavy, flat, agricultural landscape of her childhood.

For those who have been enchanted by her earlier work, the continuing story as ‘Laura goes farther’ will be compulsive reading.

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