

Flora Jane Thompson



*Still Glides
the Stream*

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THE FOOTPATH

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The Oxfordshire village of Restharrow has changed little in outward appearance during the last fifty years. Three of the old cottages have disappeared and to replace these, about half a dozen new pink-roofed bungalows have been built. The village inn has been brought up to date and its former frontage of oak beams and cream plaster has given place to one decorated with green glazed tiles and red paint; but it is still known as the *Magpie* and the old sign-board depicting that knowing bird with a gold ring in its beak still swings in its old position on the grass margin before the inn door. The old lollipop shop with bull's-eyes and barley sugar behind its dim green bottle-glass window has become the General Stores. On one of its walls a scarlet Post Office letterbox has appeared, with a notice above it stating that stamps may be obtained and parcels posted within.

One of the bungalows is occupied by a retired Metropolitan Police constable, another by the district nurse, and a lady who breeds alsatian dogs has had three of the old cottages thrown into one and installed a bathroom. The new schoolmaster is not expected to occupy the little two-roomed lean-to beside the school building which served a succession of schoolmistresses, but has his own house, remarkable for its well-kept lawn and flower-beds. The sound of his lawn-mower strikes a new note in the village

symphony, but one which blends well with cock-crowing, birdsong, the clinking of buckets, and the shouts and laughter of children at play.

During the two world wars, at Restharrow as elsewhere, hearts must have been torn with anxiety for the absent, and, at the close of both wars, there must have been those there who mourned amidst the general rejoicings. But such scars as were left were personal and invisible; no bomb fell anywhere near Restharrow; no airfield or factory was established in the immediate neighbourhood; on account of the limited accommodation, evacuees were few, and the village retained and has since kept the air of peaceful seclusion now only possible in such places, far from towns, in the heart of the country.

It is a long, straggling place, consisting of what has always been known as 'The Street', though street it is not in the ordinary sense of the term, the cottages standing singly and in groups on both sides of a country byway with fields and hedgerows between. Some of the cottages stand on high banks with flights of stone steps leading up to the doors; others have been built so flush with the road that a passing wagoner, from the top of his load, might if he chose look into the bedroom windows. One here and there of the houses has a honeysuckle-covered porch, a pink or yellow washed front, or a gable end turned to the road, but the greater number are plain, square dwellings of grey limestone, only redeemed from ugliness by the mellowing effect of time and by the profusion of old-fashioned garden flowers which is a feature of the district.

There are many trees. Apple and plum and damson trees in the cottage gardens, laburnums and lilacs at cottage gates, and everywhere in the hedgerows wide-spreading oaks and elms. Around a roadside pond halfway up the village street stand old pollarded willows, the trunks hollowed by time to mere shells in which the village children hide, but every tree with its living topknot of silvery green leaves. A few white Aylesbury ducks still frequent this pond, though not so many as in former years, when, towards nightfall, little girls with light switches in their hands would go to the pond to call in those belonging to their families. '*Dilly, dilly, dilly, dilly!*' they would call, and the ducks would scramble up the bank and, with many a backward glance from their cunning little eyes, they would form two files and waddle off, one file up and the other down the street. It was as the children said, hard to tell which was whosen; but the ducks knew to whom they belonged. In twos and threes they would break from the rank and make for the garden gate which led to the shed where they knew they would find in their troughs a delicious mess of mashed potatoes and brewer's grain. Those were the mass-minded ducks. One old drake, a strict individualist, had deserted the flock, having become so enamoured of his mistress that he followed her out of doors like a dog and, when she was at home, kept guard on the doorstep. His devotion had so endeared him to the woman that she could not bear to think of him in conjunction with sage and onions, and Mrs. Rouse, going to the well with her buckets suspended by a yoke from her shoulders, closely followed by her adoring Benny, as she

had named him, was for years one of the sights of the village.

Now, as always, the majority of the Restharrow men are farmworkers. During the last half century the proportion of these has increased, for village tradesmen are fewer. The shoemaker who made, as well as mended, footgear and employed a journeyman helper and an apprentice is now represented by an ordinary cobbler; the blacksmith, the carpenter and the stonemason, who was also the sweep, have long ago shut up shop, and the notice board of 'Adam Strong, Tailor' was, years ago, chopped up for firewood. Adam Strong—'Mus' Strong' to most of his customers, 'Adam' to a few, and plain 'Strong' to those of the gentry who employed him to do their repairs—had the reputation of being the best tailor for miles around. 'There's only one fault in your suits, Mus' Strong,' his customers would tell him; and, after a weighty pause, they would add: 'The stuff's so strong and the work so good that you can't wear 'em out nohow.' And Adam's invariable retort was, 'Try taking yours out of the box and going to church in it Sundays.' But only a small minority of the men were regular churchgoers; they left that to the women and children; and, after its first appearance as wedding attire, the best suit was folded away with lavender sprigs in its owner's clothes' chest and only taken out on high days and holidays, including the christenings, and, later, the weddings, of his children. Adam's suits cost three pounds, an enormous sum to men who, in those days, earned ten or twelve shillings a week, but the general opinion was that it paid to save up for one

before marriage, for then, they said, a man had a decent coat to his back for the rest of his days, whatever betided.

Beyond the last group of cottages and the Manor House and the Vicarage, both set well back among trees, stands the church, a small grey building with a shingled belfry and a churchyard where the unmarked graves are as waves in a sea of long grass. The sound most frequently heard there is the moaning of wood pigeons in the surrounding elm trees, for that is the end of the village and few pass beyond the church in that direction.

A long flagged path bordered on both sides by tall, pointed clipped yews, leads from the church gate to the porch, and exactly opposite to the gate on the other side of the road is a stile. One August afternoon an elderly woman stood by this stile and saw that the footpath which crossed the meadow within had become faint from disuse. It was not entirely obliterated, but could still be discerned, winding up and over the gentle rise and dipping to the moist places. A disused footpath, especially one in a district far from towns and not on the itinerary of walking clubs, is to-day no uncommon sight, nor did this particular footpath appear to have any special feature to cause her to gaze upon it so long and intently. Neither was the meadow over which it wound in any way remarkable, being but a few undulating acres of turf, brightened just then by the golds and yellows of the common later summer flowers and closed in by dark hedgerows studded with elms.

Beyond the meadow lay a prospect of other fields, some dark golden with still uncut corn, others with corn in shocks, bluish green with root crops, or grassland; broken here and

there by the dark bushiness of a copse, or by the line of tall herbage which marked a hidden watercourse. Overhead, the high, pale sky was flecked with moon-coloured clouds. Swallows darted and skimmed, white butterflies drifted with thistledown on air currents. Except for the distant dot-like figures of men working in a harvest field, these were the only living things she beheld. Such a landscape may be seen from the window of a railway carriage in almost any part of the country at that season. Yet, though homely, such scenes never tire English eyes, for there is about them a quiet charm which can heal sore hearts and tranquillize tired minds. Demanding nothing from the onlooker, they bless alike the aware and the unaware. The woman at the stile had a special awareness. Her features relaxed and her expression was that of the deep satisfaction of one who in a changed world finds one beloved thing unchanged.

Though getting on in years, she was still pleasant to look upon; of good medium height; plump, but by no means unpleasing of figure, with wavy grey hair, fresh complexion, and clear, penetrating grey eyes. Women of her type are not uncommon in that part of the country; they serve you in shops, nurse you in hospitals, and welcome and make you comfortable at inns. Often, as cleaners or caretakers, they show you round churches or other old buildings. They have good memories and can tell those interested where in the neighbourhood the rarer birds or less common wildflowers are to be found. They can relate, and relate very well, the history of an old mansion or family, or describe, and sometimes interpret, a local custom. In cases of illness or accident, they are the first to be called upon for help by

their neighbours. Chance-met strangers have been known to unfold for them the stories of their lives.

But the woman by the stile had not the appearance of an ordinary countrywoman; her neat grey suit, smart hat and good shoes were not in the country mode; neither had she the brisk, purposeful look of one going about some homely errand in a place where she knew everybody and was herself well known. That afternoon in the church and churchyard she had gazed long and intently upon objects which an inhabitant of the place might have been expected to pass unseeing, or with but a casual glance. And the graves beside which she had stood longest had not been the more recent ones, kept neatly clipped or planted with flowers, but those in the older part of the churchyard where long grasses billowed and even Clerk Tom himself had forgotten who was lying below. But she remembered; for she was a native of the village, a now-retired schoolmistress who, after an absence of many years, was revisiting the scene of her childhood. Her name was Charity Finch.

As she had passed through the village she had noted the few outward changes with a tolerant smile. The wonder, she had thought, was that they were so few when in the outer world all seemed to have changed utterly. What had touched her more nearly was that every face she had seen had been, to her, the face of a stranger. She had known where to look for those she had loved most dearly, or rather the low mounds which covered their mortal remains; but other old friends and neighbours must still be living. Where were they? When she had set out that morning from the farmhouse in the next parish where she had found rooms,

she had imagined men and women of her own age and older ones coming forward to grasp her hand and exclaim: 'Why, bless my soul! if it ain't Charity—Charity Finch? How be 'ee, me dear, how be 'ee?' but no one she had seen had recognized her and she had recognized no one.

Young women, many of whom might well have been born since her last visit to the place, stood in the doorways of cottages once occupied by well-remembered old neighbours. They hung their own artificial silk sets and the many-coloured garments of their children on clothes-lines in gardens where once rows of unbleached sheets and plain calico underwear had billowed, and called to their children from the old gateways. Some of them looked at her curiously, as if thinking, 'Who is this stranger and what is she doing in our street?' but though they were evidently now in possession they struck her as interlopers. That young person with a baby under her arm and a cigarette hanging from her lips at the door of what had been old Mrs. Burdett's cottage, a door always kept shut in those days, for Mrs. Burdett had been one of those who, as they said, kept themselves to themselves. And the girl in the skin-tight jumper bashing down apples with a clothes prop from the tree Jake Harding had planted. The apples would not be fit to eat, for the tree was an annual souring. Jake had favoured that apple because it was a good keeper, and had had several trees of that kind in his garden. Every year about Candlemas time he had gone round the village with a basketful of the fruit and handed out one apple for each member of the family at the doors of those who had shown him small kindnesses. 'Mind you bakes 'em well, missis, and

you'll find they'll come up as white and as light as snow, and when 'em be done, you mash up the inners wi' a knob o' fresh butter and all the brown sugar you've got in the pantry, then you'll know why Eve stole the apple,' he would say. It was the nearest approach to a joke he had ever been known to make, for Jake was himself a bit of an annual souring. Well, Jake had gone, and all his apple trees save one had disappeared. But the girl seemed rather a nice girl really; she had smiled as she caught her eye and wished her good morning.

The children were coming home from school and their mothers were calling to them and they were calling back to their mothers, exactly as other mothers and children had called to each other long ago. But the sound of their speech had not the homely old Oxfordshire tang it was such as might be heard in any part of the country. The children looked better fed and were better shod and clad, and the women appeared more leisured than those she had known there, and she was glad to see that, though she sadly missed the old familiar faces. She had a feeling of unreality, of herself walking like a ghost on a scene where she had once been one of the living company which then held the stage.

But here, at the church stile, she felt at home once more. The little grey church was unaltered, every stone, tile, and weather-worn carving, were exactly as she remembered. The flagstones of the pathway had become mossed at the edges as if fewer feet trod them than formerly, but the yews looked not a day older, and the chestnut by the stile beneath which she was standing was no more widely

spreading. The wood pigeons, descendants many times removed from those she had mocked in her childhood, 'Take two cows, Taffy! Take two cows, Taffy!' kept up the same perpetual moaning. Even the stile upon which she was leaning had not altered. It was still the same substantial structure, with high mounting-stools and a rounded beam for a top rail. 'T'ould take a charge of dynamite to shift this', her father had once said as he crossed it, and he had spoken authoritatively as a craftsman. The rounded top rail had been polished to glassiness by the Sunday trouser-seats of generations of village youths whose favourite perch it had been while waiting for the chimes to stop and the little *ting-tang* bell to tell them that the parson was getting into his surplice, when they would shuffle in a body up the flagstone path and tip-toe into the seat nearest the door, determined not to spend indoors a moment more than was necessary.

She saw again in memory those of her own day, heavy-footed, rosy-cheeked lads with honest eyes, wearing Sunday-best suits of pale plaids, and bright blue or pink neckties, their hair well plastered down and darkened with hair-oil, and in their buttonholes the largest and brightest flowers their parents' gardens could furnish. Some of them would wear a second flower in their hatbands. She had seen some of their names on the 1914-18 war memorial as she had passed through the village. Those of them still living must be grandfathers.

In the days of her childhood the footpath over the meadow had been a hard, well-defined track, much used by men going to their fieldwork, by children going blackberrying, nutting, or in search of violets or mushrooms,

and, on Sunday evenings, by pairs of sweethearts who preferred the seclusion of the fields and copses beyond to the more public pathways. The footpath had led to a farmhouse and a couple of cottages, and, to the dwellers in these, it had been not only the way to church and school and market, but also the first stage in every journey. It had led to London, to Queensland and Canada, to the Army depot and the troopship. Wedding and christening parties had footed it merrily, and at least one walking funeral had passed that way. She herself when a child had trodden it daily, often with her skipping-rope, her white pinafore billowing, her long hair streaming, her feet scarcely touching the ground, or so it seemed to her now. At other times she had carried a basket, on an errand for her mother, to fetch a shillingsworth of eggs, perhaps; eggs twenty a shilling. Not very large eggs, to be sure—they were common barndoor fowls' eggs—but warm from the nest and so full of a delicious milky fluid that it gushed from the shell when the egg was tapped for breakfast next morning. Most often of all she had gone that way on her own errands, for a family of her cousins had lived in the farmhouse, which, to her, had been a second home.

She knew every foot of that meadow by heart. Beneath that further hedgerow violets had grown—white violets and grey blue-veined ones, as well as the more ordinary purple. In spring that dry slope had been yellow with cowslips, short-stemmed cowslips, but honey-sweet of scent. She had once helped to pick a peck of cowslips pips there to make wine, and the flowers and their green rosettes of leaves had felt warm to her hand in the sunshine. The call of the cuckoo

had floated over from Beacon Copse, and her mother had told her to wish, because, she had said, if you wish when you hear the first cuckoo of the year your wish will be granted—if reasonable. The little girl she had then been had wished for a kitten. She would have liked a white kitten, to be called Snow, but she thought it might not be reasonable to specify colour. The kitten given to her by a neighbour a few weeks later was a tabby with a white breast. She had to wait for the first of her long succession of Snows until she was grown up and could choose it from a cage in a pet shop.

She smiled at her own wandering fancy. More than half a century lay between to-day and that day's cowslipping. Long years which had turned the little Charity, or Cherry, as she had then more often been called, into the elderly Miss Finch. Years of hard work and many disappointments, a typical schoolmarm's life. But there had been compensations. One here and there of her pupils had shown the sudden gleam of comprehension, the mental and spiritual response to her teaching which sometimes in her lighter moments she had referred to when talking to her colleagues as 'plugging in', or 'taking the bait', but which in her secret thoughts she had treasured as her most precious experience. That, and the privilege of fostering such promise, had been the chief joy of her life; but there had also been material advantages, personal independence, a home of her own, books, friends and holiday travel. She had planned for herself a trip round the world the year she retired, but by that time the world was at war, and travelling impossible. Instead of voyaging round the world, she had gone back to her work and was only now free. A few weeks

back she had been spending a weekend with a friend in her Essex cottage and, while there, she had smelled a bean field in bloom. The scent had so vividly brought back to her the bean rows by the beehives in her father's garden that she had felt an irresistible longing to see her old home. She had no longer anyone belonging to her living at Restharrow and had not herself been there for twenty-four years, but the impulse was so strong it had to be obeyed.

She had that morning found unoccupied the thatched cottage where she had lived with her parents, and had gazed through broken and cobwebbed windowpanes at the old familiar rooms. Cold ashes filled the grate where cheerful fires had once burned; torn wallpaper hung in tatters on the walls; and the red-tiled floor which her mother had made cosy with rugs was mudstained and littered with straw. At the side of the house an outhouse door, hinges broken, stood wide open, exposing the seat of the earth closet within. Thistles and weeds choked the flower borders, the sprawling limbs of neglected shrubs blocked the pathway, and, although the day was warm and sunny, the air had the chill, moist smell of decay.

The desolation was no more than she might have expected. Men, she had been aware, were everywhere leaving the land and taking their families to live in towns, and those remaining would naturally prefer to live in one of the more convenient cottages. Still, dilapidated as it had become, the cottage had character and it was roomy; she herself could live happily there, and she had spent some time thinking out what improvements could be made and what furniture would look best in the different rooms. She

still had several of the old family pieces which had helped to furnish the house in her childhood, and she felt she would like to see them back in the old positions. It was a daydream, of course, a daydream! She could not put back the clock. Cliffbourne was now her home; there she had her nice little flat and her friends and her committee work and her evening classes. She was too old to be retransplanted. And yet——

Her dreams were dispersed by a polite cough behind her; she turned and saw standing in the road a countryman with a scythe upon his shoulder. She scanned his face hopefully, for he was a man of about her own age, but again the face was that of a stranger. 'Good arternoon to you, ma'am,' he was saying, then, perhaps thinking to save her a fruitless walk, he added: 'That path over the stile there don't lead nowhere.'

'But it was used a good deal at one time,' she said, and he, perhaps taking the statement for a question, replied, 'Yes, I dare say. There used to be a farmhouse over there, but they had a bit of a fire and what wasn't destroyed outright went to rack and ruin afterwards. Nobody's lived there since.'

Charity remembered the fire. Would she ever forget it! But all she said now, and why she said it she did not know, was, 'What kind of people lived there?'

The man smiled good-naturedly. 'Ah! now you're axin' me summat,' he said. 'It all happened years before I come here—I'm a Launton man myself. "Launton, God help us," they call it, though God knows why!' Charity knew, but she did not enlighten him, and, after a few moments' consideration,

he went on: 'I've bin told that the farmer hisself didn't live at the farm. He'd got a better and bigger place at t'other end o' th' village and had put some of his workfolks into th' old un. So they wer' just folks, I s'pose, what wer' livin' there. Just folks, same as anybody else might be, just folks!' and, scythe on shoulder, he plodded on.

Just folks! How well that described those she had known there. Just folks like anybody else might be who for the short term of a lifetime had held a lease of their world with all the pride of permanent possession; then, when their time had expired, they had disappeared and others had taken their places. The green fields, the footpath, the village street, had known them no more, a new generation had taken possession and even their names were forgotten. Forgotten by all but her, the one living survivor of the family. In her memory they still lived, moved, and had their being. In imagination she still heard their voices and saw them in their accustomed haunts, and to her, at that moment, they appeared more vividly alive than many of the still living.

Before her inward eye the footpath became once more a well-beaten track, the meadow yellowed over with buttercups, the hedgerows frothed with may. And who were these coming towards her? Two tall girls in their teens, her cousins, Bess and Mercy, and the small, fat child who swung on their hands between them, her feet now off the ground, now on it, was little Polly. Pollywaddles, they used to call her because she was such a soft, dimpled, roly-poly little thing and late in learning to walk. To encourage her now and to help her along, Bess was singing an old country rhyme:

All in a row, a bendy bow,

Shot at a pigeon and killed a crow,
Shot at another and killed his brother,
And then went home and told his mother,

and Charity, as in fancy she rushed to meet and fall down with them among the buttercups, took up the strain, *All a row, a bendy bow!*

A bended bow! The only bow known to those children was of the homemade kind, used with a pointed stick for arrow by boys for shooting at sparrows, and the story behind the lines they sang conveyed to them nothing of the tragedy they apparently commemorated. Echoed for centuries by children at play the rhyme had become meaningless, mere words, a jingle to hop, skip, and jump to. Theirs had been the day of the bayonet and the Gatling gun, of horse-drawn gun-carriages and balloon observation, of soldiers fighting in tight-necked scarlet tunics. The most gallant among them knelt before a gentle, white-handed woman to be decorated. Some had spoken of her as Victoria the Good; others, more flippantly, as the Widow of Windsor; but all spoke of her with affection, for had she not said that she loved every soldier in her forces as her own child? Their world had seemed to them to be a modern, progressive world; but now, looking back upon it over the vortex of war upon war, the simple life of that time was seen to be in all but actual time nearer to the bow-and-arrow age than to that of the bombing aeroplane.

The fighting man she now envisaged was a tall, leggy youth in a scarlet tunic who crossed the meadow at a run, leapt the stile, and, finding on the farther side a small girl in a blue Mother Hubbard bonnet, snatched her up in his arms

to lift her over, then paused with her in the air above his head to exclaim: 'Why, Cherry, how light you are! You don't weigh no more than a feather. I believe your bones are hollow, like a bird's. I could put you on my shoulder and run with you all the way to Banbury. You'd like me to take you to Banbury Fair, wouldn't you, Cherry? You wait till I come home from India, you'll be a big girl by then, and I'll squire you to Banbury and buy you a silk handkerchief with the Queen's picture on it and as much toffee and brandysnap as you can eat, you see if I don't!' And he passed from her vision, as he had passed from her sight on that long-ago misty morning when he had swung off down the village street to meet the carrier's cart at the crossroads.

Then Bess, the grown-up Bess, in her fresh pink gingham and shady hat, came, swinging her blackberrying basket, her round, freckled face as innocent-looking as if, as they said, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. Who, seeing her cross the meadow so leisurely, could have guessed she was off to the pond to meet the young squire and by so doing to start a train of events which would set every tongue in the village wagging?

And Charity's uncle, Reuben Truman. He had used that footpath all his life, for he had been born in the parish. When a child he must often have played in the meadow; as a youth and young man he had crossed it to his work in the fields, and, later, for thirty years, the footpath had led to his home. She saw him now as she remembered him best, a shortish but solidly built and erect man, somewhat past the prime of life, his dark hair and beard sprinkled with grey, and the eyes in his honest countryman's face clear and

steadfast. He was wearing his decent churchgoing suit of an old-fashioned pepper-and-salt mixture, and under his arm he carried his old family Prayer Book with its gilt-edged leaves shut tightly in with brass clasps. In his hand or his buttonhole there would be a stalk or two of lavender, or a sprig of southernwood, thyme, or some other sweet-smelling herb. In his childhood it had been a general custom to carry such sprigs of sweet herbs to church, and he loved to keep up the old country ways, including regular churchgoing.

And others, old neighbours and friends and relations, came thronging into her memory, and countryside figures all dead and forgotten, even by her, until to-day. As she walked back through the fields to the farmhouse where she was staying, their faces, their actions, words and expressions, long forgotten or not consciously remembered, were recalled; and seen in the perspective of time and in the light of mature experience they took on a new significance. The dead lived again, the missing peopled their former haunts, and for her, for one sunset hour, the past and the present merged in one pattern of living.

On her first arrival the farm people had welcomed her effusively; they were young people, interested in education, and far in advance of herself in many of their ideas. They declared themselves intolerant of social snobbery, yet, after learning from herself something of her local antecedents, they had cooled visibly towards her, and for the next few days after her first visit to Restharrow she seldom saw for more than a few moments any other than the maid who brought in her meals. In her present thoughtful reminiscent

mood this suited her well. During her long solitary walks, in bed at night, or with an unread book propped up before her at table, her mind continued to explore the past. She went again to Restharrow and, after making inquiries, found still living there a few survivors of her own and her parents' generations. When talking over old times with these, they supplied her with details she had forgotten, or had not known, and from their varying viewpoints threw crosslights on happenings already in her mind, though none of them appeared to have retained more than a few isolated impressions.

She found herself being addressed by these old neighbours as 'Miss Finch', or 'Ma'am', and although she repeatedly asked them to call her 'Charity', as in the old days, the usual response was, 'Oh, no! I couldn't; not now! You says you be and I knows you be, or was, that little gal of George Finch's, but it don't seem as if you can be, somehow.'

'I assure you I am that same person,' Charity would say with a smile; but, although she so frequently stated the fact, she herself found it increasingly difficult to identify that same child with the woman she had become. She attributed the feeling of detachment which grew upon her to her long absence and to the world-shaking events of the later years; but she discovered afterwards that her experience is one not uncommon to age, looking backwards in time.

Then, one afternoon, while sipping tea in a hop-covered arbour in the farmhouse orchard, her only company web-spinning spiders and a robin pecking up the crumbs of her biscuit, herself thinking of quite irrelevant matters, such as

the proper airing of her bed at home in her flat at Cliffbourne, it suddenly occurred to her that the part of the child Charity had been that of a learner, an onlooker, rather than that of an actor on that bygone scene. Her then companions had been living their lives fully; hers had not properly begun. They were eventually to close their eyes for ever on an order of living they had at birth found firmly established and which they had accepted as inevitable, never suspecting that already its foundations were crumbling and that in a very few years it would have become but a fading memory. Long after they had passed from this earthly scene, her own life had gone on, through the disruptions of war and change, into a new world of marvellous discoveries, overturned idols, changed values, and a new conception of human relationships. Though she was by no means aged as age is considered to-day, her own life had bridged the old and the new worlds, and now, while appreciating the new resources and rejoicing in the new opportunities and new freedoms, she could still look back on the past with loyal affection.

The world of her childhood had been a narrow world, inhabited by simple people whose lives had been restricted by poverty and other hardships and deprivations; yet it had held something of beauty, of unself-conscious simplicity and downright integrity that seemed to her worthy of remembrance.

Two

MISS FINCH REMEMBERS

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The cottage where she had been born and had lived as a child with her parents was the first on the right hand side when coming into the village, and stood at the point where the narrow, tree-shaded lane which led to the crossroads widened into the village street. Between the house and the road a brown path zigzagged over a stretch of rough turf and, to reach the gate, the brook which ran below the garden hedge had to be crossed by way of a plank bridge with a handrail. In summer this small stream was so choked with willow-herb and water-mint that its gentle murmur could barely be heard above the humming of the hive-bees. After the autumn rains, on quiet winter days, pauses in the conversation within-doors were filled by the sound of running water. Even in the hottest summer the stream never dried up, and this, she was told, was because it was fed by well-springs. Charity's father called the house their castle and the brook their moat and laughed when a neighbour asked him how he could a-bear to live in such a lonesome old place, adding that to live there would have made him feel unked.

At that time village houses had no numbers or names, the names of the occupants being sufficient distinction, and Charity's home was usually spoken of as 'Finch's', though some of the older inhabitants persisted in calling it 'Gaspar's'. Tradition said that a white wizard of that name

had once lived there and that he had made a fortune by charming away illnesses, finding lost things, and telling people their lucky days. He had either died suddenly or disappeared, and was supposed to have left his hoard hidden beneath the thatch or under the floor-boards. But although Charity searched hopefully, she never found anything of more value than a coil of wire, a pewter spoon, and a King George III penny. When she found the penny her father laughed and told her to take care of it, for it was the first coin that had ever come into their family without hard labour.

He must have intended that as a joke, for he was the last man in the world to make hard labour of his work. To him his craft was his pleasure as well as his means of livelihood. He was the village carpenter and had a workshop at the back of the cottage. On some days he worked there, making doors and window-frames and mantelpieces, or making or mending furniture; on other days he went out to mend gates and fences and to build sheds for the farmers. The farm work was known as rough carpentry, and he preferred the smoother, workshop kind; but, as he said, you had to take rough and smooth as it came to make a living in a small place like Restharrow. Before Charity was born he had made for her a wooden cradle with a carved hood and sides and with rockers he had guaranteed to outlast three lifetimes, no matter how hard or how often the cradle was rocked. Charity had put her doll or her kitten to bed in it until her mother had given it to a very poor family, who, after their last baby had outgrown it, had used it as a washtub and left it out in the rain. Her mother would have preferred one of

the more fashionable wickerwork cradles, lined with pink glazed calico covered with spotted muslin.

The cottage was an old-fashioned, countrified place standing in a garden crammed with fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, and lavender bushes. Inside, it had none of the conveniences now considered essential to comfort. Water had to be drawn up with a long hooked pole from a well in the garden; paraffin lamps and candles lighted the hours of darkness, and the sanitation was primitive. There were red-tiled floors in the downstairs rooms, and the only fireplace besides the small oven grate in the kitchen was the parlour grate, of the high, bow-barred, basket-shaped kind under a high mantelpiece now seen only in old prints. But the unenlightened Finches found their house comfortable enough; indeed, they rather prided themselves upon living in one of the most commodious cottages in the village, with a parlour and three bedrooms, whereas most of their neighbours had but one room downstairs and two, at most, upstairs. The tiled floors were made warm and comfortable with home-made rugs and long strips of red and brown matting, and the low price of coals made it possible to keep up roaring great fires in cold weather. 'I'm going to make this house as warm and snug as a chaffinch's nest,' her mother had said one day, while spreading out on the floor a handsome new black-and-scarlet rug she had been making, and that idea had pleased her small daughter, for weren't they themselves Finches, and was not the cottage their nest? She liked the idea of a nest better than that of a castle, for a castle she had never seen, and there were nests in every hedgerow.

People in the neighbouring villages, speaking from the superior standpoint of those living one, two, or three miles nearer a town, used to say that the Restharrow folks were a rum lot, and it may be that, secluded as they were from outside influence, they had lagged behind in the march of progress. Many of the old country customs, dead or dying out elsewhere, were still honoured at Restharrow. There were the Christmas mummers, the May Day garland; broad beans were planted in gardens on Candlemas Day. *Candlemas Day, stick beans in the clay. Throw candle and candlestick right away*, they would quote. But they no longer heeded the second admonition; they lighted their paraffin lamps and stayed up until nine or ten. If a lamp burned low or smoked, the older ones would say, 'Pon my soul, this lamp's no better than a farthing rushlight!' and describe to their grandchildren how their own mothers had dipped and dipped and dipped a rush from the brook in melted fat to form the tiny, twinkling candles of their childhood. 'You young uns be a lucky little lot,' they would say. 'You'll never know life in the rough with all these wonderful inventions.'

At Restharrow sprigs of oak leaves were worn on 29 May to commemorate the escape from his enemies of King Charles II in the Boscobel Oak. That day had become known as Shigshag Day, and on it no child or young person dared to appear in public without their oak-sprig, for, had they done so, every wearer of one would have rushed to them and trodden on their toes. Many Prayer Books still in use contained the service formerly used in church on the day devoted to the memory of King Charles I—'King Charles the

Martyr'. On Easter Sunday something new had to be worn, if only a bootlace; on Whit-Sunday, something white: if these observances were neglected the birds of the air would drop their little messes on the offender. Nobody would open an umbrella indoors, even to dry it, for that was certain to bring bad luck, or eat one single blackberry after Michaelmas Day, for then the devil dragged his tail over those left on the bushes. But the observance of such customs and superstitions was not as yet so singular as to mark the participants as rum. That reputation was probably founded on a certain untamedness, a closer-to-earth earthiness, a hanging together in clans and regarding outsiders as potential enemies, shown by the older inhabitants.

As was then usual in small country places where little happened to crowd out of village memory the events of former years, old traditions were cherished and old stories re-told. Village memory was long, very long. In the eighteen-eighties an aged man told Charity that his great-great-grandfather, when what he described as 'a girt, lolloping lad', sat on a field gate on a Sunday morning and looked on at the Battle of Edgehill—a family tradition which may or may not have been founded on fact. Charity, after working it out on paper, decided that there should have been at least one more 'great' in it; on the other hand, the correct day of the week gave a circumstantial touch to the story. Another aged man remembered the arrival in this country of the news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the bonfires lighted to celebrate our victory. Everybody over sixty remembered Queen Victoria's Coronation, and the Crimean