

Contents

Between the Acts	I
<i>Note on the Text</i>	I4I
<i>Notes</i>	I4I
Extra Material on <i>Between the Acts</i>	I5I
<i>Virginia Woolf's Life</i>	I53
<i>Virginia Woolf's Works</i>	I65
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	I77

Other books by VIRGINIA WOOLF
published by Alma Classics

Flush

Jacob's Room

Monday or Tuesday

Mrs Dalloway

Night and Day

Orlando

A Room of One's Own

To the Lighthouse

The Voyage Out

The Waves

The Years

Between the Acts

NOTE

The MS of this book had been completed, but had not been finally revised for the printer, at the time of Virginia Woolf's death. She would not, I believe, have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs.

LEONARD WOOLF

It was a summer's night, and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool. The county council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't.

Mrs Haines, the wife of the gentleman farmer, a goose-faced woman with eyes protruding as if they saw something to gobble in the gutter, said affectedly: "What a subject to talk about on a night like this!"

Then there was silence, and a cow coughed – and that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses. But then, as a small child in a perambulator, a great cart-horse had brushed within an inch of her face. Her family, she told the old man in the armchair, had lived near Liskeard* for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it.

A bird chuckled outside. "A nightingale?" asked Mrs Haines. No, nightingales didn't come so far north. It was a daylight bird, chuckling over the substance and succulence of the day, over worms, snails, grit, even in sleep.

The old man in the armchair – Mr Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired – said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons, by the Romans, by the Elizabethan manor house and by the plough when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic Wars.

"But you don't remember..." Mrs Haines began. No, not that. Still he did remember... and he was about to tell them what when there was a sound outside, and Isa, his son's wife, came

in with her hair in pigtailed; she was wearing a dressing gown with faded peacocks on it. She came in like a swan swimming its way – then was checked and stopped, was surprised to find people there, and lights burning. She had been sitting with her little boy who wasn't well, she apologized. What had they been saying?

"Discussing the cesspool," said Mr Oliver.

"What a subject to talk about on a night like this!" Mrs Haines exclaimed again.

What had *he* said about the cesspool – or indeed about anything? Isa wondered, inclining her head towards the gentleman farmer, Rupert Haines. She had met him at a bazaar, and at a tennis party. He had handed her a cup and a racket – that was all. But in his ravaged face she always felt mystery – and in his silence, passion. At the tennis party she had felt this, and at the bazaar. Now a third time, if anything more strongly, she felt it again.

"I remember," the old man interrupted, "my mother..." Of his mother he remembered that she was very stout, kept her tea caddy locked, yet had given him in that very room a copy of Byron. It was over sixty years ago, he told them, that his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room. He paused.

"She walks in beauty, like the night,"* he quoted.

Then again:

"So we'll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon."*

Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans downstream. But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed – and she too, in her webbed feet, was entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker. Sitting on her three-cornered chair, she swayed, with her dark pigtailed hanging and her body like a bolster in its faded dressing gown.

Mrs Haines was aware of the emotion circling them, excluding her. She waited, as one waits for the strain of an organ to die out before leaving church. In the car going home to the red villa in the cornfields, she would destroy it, as a thrush pecks the wings off

a butterfly. Allowing ten seconds to intervene, she rose, paused – and then, as if she had heard the last strain die out, offered Mrs Giles Oliver her hand.

But Isa, though she should have risen at the same moment that Mrs Haines rose, sat on. Mrs Haines glared at her out of goose-like eyes, gobbling “Please, Mrs Giles Oliver, do me the kindness to recognize my existence...” – which she was forced to do, rising at last from her chair, in her faded dressing gown, with the pigtailed falling over each shoulder.

Pointz Hall was seen in the light of an early summer morning to be a middle-sized house. It did not rank among the houses that are mentioned in guidebooks. It was too homely. But this whitish house with the grey roof and the wing thrown out at right angles, lying unfortunately low on the meadow, with a fringe of trees on the bank above it so that smoke curled up to the nests of the rooks, was a desirable house to live in. Driving past, people said to each other: “I wonder if that’ll ever come into the market?” And to the chauffeur: “Who lives there?”

The chauffeur didn’t know. The Olivers, who had bought the place something over a century ago, had no connection with the Warings, the Elveys, the Mannerings or the Burnets – the old families who had all intermarried and lay in their deaths intertwined, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall.

Only something over a hundred and twenty years the Olivers had been there. Still, on going up the principal staircase – there was another, a mere ladder at the back for the servants – there was a portrait. A length of yellow brocade was visible halfway up, and, as one reached the top, a small powdered face, a great headdress slung with pearls, came into view – an ancestress of sorts. Six or seven bedrooms opened out of the corridor. The butler had been a soldier, had married a lady’s maid – and, under a glass case, there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo.

It was early morning. The dew was on the grass. The church clock struck eight times. Mrs Swithin* drew the curtain in her

bedroom – the faded white chintz that so agreeably from the outside tinged the window with its green lining. There with her old hands on the hasp, jerking it open, she stood – old Oliver’s married sister, a widow. She always meant to set up a house of her own – perhaps in Kensington, perhaps at Kew – so that she could have the benefit of the gardens. But she stayed on all through the summer, and when winter wept its damp upon the panes and choked the gutters with dead leaves, she said: “Why, Bart, did they build the house in the hollow, facing north?” Her brother said, “Obviously to escape from nature. Weren’t four horses needed to drag the family coach through the mud?” Then he told her the famous story of the great eighteenth-century winter, when for a whole month the house had been blocked by snow. And the trees had fallen. So every year, when winter came, Mrs Swithin retired to Hastings.

But it was summer now. She had been waked by the birds. How they sang, attacking the dawn like so many choirboys attacking an iced cake! Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading – *An Outline of History** – and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly, when the entire Continent – not then, she understood, divided by a channel – was all one, populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing and, she supposed, barking monsters: the iguanodon, the mammoth and the mastodon – from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind-time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. Naturally she jumped as Grace put the tray down and said: “Good morning, ma’am.” “Batty,” Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron.

“How those birds sing!” said Mrs Swithin, at a venture. The window was open now – the birds certainly were singing. An obliging thrush hopped across the lawn, a coil of pinkish rubber twisted in its beak. Tempted by the sight to continue her imaginative reconstruction of the past, Mrs Swithin paused; she was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future, or sidelong down corridors and alleys, but she remembered her mother – her mother in that very room rebuking her. “Don’t stand gaping, Lucy, or the wind’ll change...” How often her mother had rebuked her in that very room – “but in a very different world,” as her brother would remind her. So she sat down to morning tea, like any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast.

The nurses after breakfast were trundling the perambulator up and down the terrace, and as they trundled they were talking – not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words like sweets on their tongues, which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green and sweetness. This morning that sweetness was “How cook had told ’im off about the asparagus; how when she rang I said how it was a sweet costume with blouse to match” – and that was leading to something about a feller as they walked up and down the terrace rolling sweets, trundling the perambulator.

It was a pity that the man who had built Pointz Hall had pitched the house in a hollow, when beyond the flower garden and the vegetables there was this stretch of high ground. Nature had provided a site for a house – man had built his house in a hollow. Nature had provided a stretch of turf half a mile in length and level, till it suddenly dipped to the lily pool. The terrace was broad enough to take the entire shadow of one of the great trees laid flat. There you could walk up and down, up and down, under the shade of the trees. Two or three grew

close together, then there were gaps. Their roots broke the turf, and among those bones were green waterfalls and cushions of grass in which violets grew in spring or in summer the wild purple orchis.

Amy was saying something about a feller when Mabel, with her hand on the pram, turned sharply, her sweet swallowed. "Leave off grubbing," she said sharply. "Come along, George."

The little boy had lagged and was grouting in the grass. Then the baby, Caro, thrust her fist out over the coverlet, and the furry bear was jerked overboard. Amy had to stoop. George grubbed. The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet – it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall – leaf-smelling, earth-smelling – of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower – the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing, he held the flower complete. Then there was a roar and a hot breath, and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.

"Good morning, sir," a hollow voice boomed at him from a beak of paper.

The old man had sprung upon him from his hiding place behind a tree.

"Say good morning, George – say 'Good morning, Grandpa'," Mabel urged him, giving him a push towards the man. But George stood gaping. George stood gazing. Then Mr Oliver crumpled the paper which he had cocked into a snout and appeared in person. A very tall old man, with gleaming eyes, wrinkled cheeks and a head with no hair on it. He turned.

"Heel!" he bawled. "Heel, you brute!" And George turned, and the nurses turned, holding the furry bear – they all turned to look at Sohrab* the Afghan hound bounding and bouncing among the flowers.

“Heel!” the old man bawled, as if he were commanding a regiment. It was impressive, to the nurses, the way an old boy of his age could still bawl and make a brute like that obey him. Back came the Afghan hound, sidling, apologetic. And as he cringed at the old man’s feet, a string was slipped over his collar – the noose that old Oliver always carried with him.

“You wild beast... you bad beast,” he grumbled, stooping. George looked at the dog only. The hairy flanks were sucked in and out – there was a blob of foam on its nostrils. He burst out crying.

Old Oliver raised himself, his veins swollen, his cheeks flushed; he was angry. His little game with the paper hadn’t worked. The boy was a crybaby. He nodded and sauntered on, smoothing out the crumpled paper and muttering, as he tried to find his line in the column, “A crybaby – a crybaby.” But the breeze blew the great sheet out, and over the edge he surveyed the landscape – flowing fields, heath and woods. Framed, they became a picture. Had he been a painter, he would have fixed his easel here, where the country, barred by trees, looked like a picture. Then the breeze fell.

“M. Daladier,”* he read, finding his place in the column, “has been successful in pegging down the franc...”

Mrs Giles Oliver drew the comb through the thick tangle of hair which, after giving the matter her best attention, she had never had shingled or bobbed, and lifted the heavily embossed silver brush that had been a wedding present and had its uses in impressing chambermaids in hotels. She lifted it and stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her rather heavy yet handsome face – and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and treetops.

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. “In love” was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing table, among the silver boxes and toothbrushes, was the other love: love for her husband, the stockbroker – “The father of my children,” she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently

provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes – outer love on the dressing table. But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator, two nurses and her little boy George, lagging behind?

She tapped on the window with her embossed hairbrush. They were too far off to hear. The drone of the trees was in their ears, the chirp of birds – other incidents of garden life, inaudible, invisible to her in the bedroom, absorbed them. Isolated on a green island, hedged about with snowdrops, laid with a counterpane of puckered silk, the innocent island floated under her window. Only George lagged behind.

She returned to her eyes in the looking glass. “In love” she must be, since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her – since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racket, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her, and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating... she groped, in the depths of the looking glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon.* Faster, faster, faster it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail, and up soared the plane away and away..

“Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,” she hummed. “Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent...”

The rhyme was “air”. She put down her brush. She took up the telephone.

“Three, four, eight, Pyecombe,” she said.

“Mrs Oliver speaking... What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?”

“There to lose what binds us here,” she murmured. “Soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please,” she said aloud. “With a feather, a blue feather... flying mounting through the air... there to lose what binds us here...” The words weren’t worth writing in the book bound like an account book, in case Giles suspected. “Abortive”

was the word that expressed her. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired – nor did her figure, seen against the dark roll of trousering in a shop window, please her. Thick of waist, large of limb and, save for her hair, fashionable in the tight modern way, she never looked like Sappho, or one of the beautiful young men whose photographs adorned the weekly papers. She looked what she was: Sir Richard's daughter, and niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud, being O'Neils, of their descent from the Kings of Ireland.

A foolish, flattering lady, pausing on the threshold of what she once called "the heart of the house", the threshold of the library, had once said: "Next to the kitchen, the library's always the nicest room in the house." Then she added, stepping across the threshold: "Books are the mirrors of the soul."

In this case a tarnished, a spotted soul. For as the train took over three hours to reach this remote village in the very heart of England, no one ventured so long a journey without staving off possible mind-hunger, without buying a book on a bookstall. Thus the mirror that reflected the soul sublime reflected also the soul bored. Nobody could pretend, as they looked at the shuffle of shilling shockers that weekenders had dropped, that the looking glass always reflected the anguish of a queen or the heroism of King Harry.*

At this early hour of a June morning the library was empty. Mrs Giles had to visit the kitchen. Mr Oliver still tramped the terrace. And Mrs Swithin was of course at church. The light but variable breeze, foretold by the weather expert, flapped the yellow curtain, tossing light, then shadow. The fire greyed, then glowed, and the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window – beat, beat, beat – repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane.

Heralded by the impetuosity of the Afghan hound, the old man entered. He had read his paper; he was drowsy, and so sank down

into the chintz-covered chair with the dog at his feet – the Afghan hound. His nose on his paws, his haunches drawn up, he looked a stone dog, a crusader's dog, guarding even in the realms of death the sleep of his master. But the master was not dead, only dreaming, drowsily seeing as in a glass, its lustre spotted, himself, a young man helmeted, and a cascade falling. But no water, and the hills like grey stuff pleated, and in the sand a hoop of ribs, a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun, and in the shadow of the rock savages, and in his hand a gun. The dream hand clenched – the real hand lay on the chair arm, the veins swollen but only with a brownish fluid now.

The door opened.

“Am I,” Isa apologized, “interrupting?”

Of course she was – destroying youth and India. It was his fault, since she had persisted in stretching his thread of life so fine, so far. Indeed he was grateful to her, watching her as she strolled about the room, for continuing.

Many old men had only their India – old men in clubs, old men in rooms off Jermyn Street. She in her striped dress continued him, murmuring, in front of the bookcases: “The moor is dark beneath the moon; rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beams of even...” I have ordered the fish,” she said aloud, turning, “though whether it’ll be fresh or not I can’t promise. But veal is dear, and everybody in the house is sick of beef and mutton... Sohrab,” she said, coming to a standstill in front of them. “What’s *he* been doing?”

His tail never wagged. He never admitted the ties of domesticity. Either he cringed or he bit. Now his wild yellow eyes gazed at her, gazed at him. He could outstare them both. Then Oliver remembered:

“Your little boy’s a crybaby,” he said scornfully.

“Oh,” she sighed, pegged down on a chair arm, like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity. “What’s been happening?”

“I took the newspaper,” he explained, “so...”

He took it and crumpled it into a beak over his nose. “So” he had sprung out from behind a tree onto the children.

“And he howled. He’s a coward – your boy is.”

She frowned. He was not a coward – her boy wasn’t. And she loathed the domestic, the possessive – the maternal. And he knew it and did it on purpose to tease her, the old brute, her father-in-law.

She looked away.

“The library’s always the nicest room in the house,” she quoted, and ran her eyes along the books. “The mirror of the soul”, books were. *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake’s *Crimea*; Keats and the *Kreutzer Sonata*.^{*} There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age – the age of the century, thirty-nine – in books? Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation – and gun-shy too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem – a life. The life of Garibaldi.^{*} The life of Lord Palmerston.^{*} Or perhaps not a person’s life – a county’s. *The Antiquities of Durham*, *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science – Eddington, Darwin or Jeans.^{*}

None of them stopped her toothache. For her generation the newspaper was a book – and, as her father-in-law had dropped *The Times*, she took it and read “A horse with a green tail...” – which was fantastic. Next, “The guard at Whitehall...”, which was romantic, and then, building word upon word, she read: “The troopers told her the horse had a green tail, but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room, where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face...”^{*}

That was real – so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall,^{*} through the Arch the barrack room, in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs Swithin carrying a hammer.

She advanced, sidling, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes, and, advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, sidelong, at her brother. Not a word passed between them as she went to the cupboard in the corner and replaced the hammer, which she had taken without asking leave, together – she unclosed her fist – with a handful of nails.

“Cindy – Cindy,” he growled, as she shut the cupboard door.

Lucy, his sister, was three years younger than he was. The name Cindy, or Sindy, for it could be spelt either way, was short for Lucy. It was by this name that he had called her when they were children, when she had trotted after him as he fished, and had made the meadow flowers into tight little bunches, winding one long grass stalk round and round and round. Once, she remembered, he had made her take the fish off the hook herself. The blood had shocked her – “Oh!” she had cried – for the gills were full of blood. And he had growled: “Cindy!” The ghost of that morning in the meadow was in her mind as she replaced the hammer where it belonged on one shelf and the nails where they belonged on another and shut the cupboard – about which, for he still kept his fishing tackle there, he was still so very particular.

“I’ve been nailing the placard on the barn,” she said, giving him a little pat on the shoulder.

The words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second – as the second peals, you hear the third. So when Isa heard Mrs Swithin say “I’ve been nailing the placard to the barn”, she knew she would say next:

“For the pageant.”

And he would say:

“Today? By Jupiter! I’d forgotten!”

“If it’s fine,” Mrs Swithin continued, “they’ll act on the terrace...”

“And if it’s wet,” Bartholomew continued, “in the barn.”

“And which will it be?” Mrs Swithin continued. “Wet or fine?”

Then, for the seventh time in succession, they both looked out of the window.

Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words – about the hammer and the nails, the pageant and the weather. Every year they said would it be wet or fine, and every year it was... one or the other. The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer.”

“The forecast,” said Mr Oliver, turning the pages till he found it, “says: variable winds, fair average temperature, rain at times.”

He put down the paper, and they all looked at the sky to see whether the sky obeyed the meteorologist. Certainly the weather was variable. It was green in the garden, grey the next. Here came the sun – an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forbore to look on human suffering. There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds as they thinned and thickened. Was it their own law or no law they obeyed? Some were wisps of white hair merely. One, high up, very distant, had hardened to golden alabaster – was made of immortal marble. Beyond that was blue, pure blue, black blue – blue that had never filtered down, that had escaped registration. It never fell as sun, shadow or rain upon the world, but disregarded the little coloured ball of earth entirely. No flower felt it – no field, no garden.

Mrs Swithin’s eyes glazed as she looked at it. Isa thought her gaze was fixed because she saw God there, God on his throne. But as a shadow fell next moment on the garden, Mrs Swithin loosed and lowered her fixed look and said:

“It’s very unsettled. It’ll rain, I’m afraid. We can only pray,” she added, and fingered her crucifix.

“And provide umbrellas,” said her brother.

Lucy flushed. He had struck her faith. When she said “pray”, he added “umbrellas”. She half-covered the cross with her fingers. She shrank – she cowered – but next moment she exclaimed:

“Oh there they are, the darlings!”

The perambulator was passing across the lawn.

Isa looked too. What an angel she was, the old woman! Thus to salute the children, to beat up against those immensities and the old man's irreverences her skinny hands, her laughing eyes! How courageous to defy Bart and the weather!

"He looks blooming," said Mrs Swithin.

"It's astonishing how they pick up," said Isa.

"He ate his breakfast?" Mrs Swithin asked.

"Every scrap," said Isa.

"And baby? No sign of measles?"

Isa shook her head. "Touch wood," she added, tapping the table.

"Tell me, Bart," said Mrs Swithin turning to her brother, "what's the origin of that? Touch wood... Antaeus, didn't he touch earth?"*

She would have been, he thought, a very clever woman, had she fixed her gaze. But this led to that – that to the other. What went in at this ear went out at that. And all were circled, as happens after seventy, by one recurring question. Hers was: should she live at Kensington or at Kew? But every year, when winter came, she did neither. She took lodgings at Hastings.

"Touch wood... touch earth... Antaeus," he muttered, bringing the scattered bits together. Lemprière* would settle it – or the *Encyclopaedia*.* But it was not in books the answer to his question – why, in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being? She didn't, he supposed, invest it with hair, teeth or toenails. It was, he supposed, more of a force or a radiance controlling the thrush and the worm, the tulip and the hound – and himself, too, an old man with swollen veins. It got her out of bed on a cold morning and sent her down the muddy path to worship it, whose mouthpiece was Streatfield. A good fellow who smoked cigars in the vestry. He needed some solace, doling out preachments to asthmatic elders, perpetually repairing the perpetually falling steeple by means of placards nailed to barns. The love, he was thinking, that they should give to flesh and blood they give to the church... when Lucy, rapping her fingers on the table, said:

"What's the origin... the origin... of that?"

“Superstition,” he said.

She flushed, and the little breath too was audible that she drew in as once more he struck a blow at her faith. But brother and sister, flesh and blood, was not a barrier, but a mist. Nothing changed their affection – no argument, no fact, no truth. What she saw he didn’t – what he saw she didn’t... and so on, *ad infinitum*.

“Cindy,” he growled. And the quarrel was over.

The barn to which Lucy had nailed her placard was a great building in the farmyard. It was as old as the church, and built of the same stone, but it had no steeple. It was raised on cones of grey stone at the corners to protect it from rats and damp. Those who had been to Greece always said it reminded them of a temple. Those who had never been to Greece – the majority – admired it all the same. The roof was weathered red-orange, and inside it was a hollow hall, sun-shafted, brown, smelling of corn, dark when the doors were shut, but splendidly illuminated when the doors at the end stood open, as they did to let the wagons in – the long, low wagons, like ships of the sea, breasting the corn, not the sea, returning in the evening shagged with hay. The lanes caught tufts where the wagons had passed.

Now benches were drawn across the floor of the barn. If it rained, the actors were to act in the barn: planks had been laid together at one end to form a stage. Wet or fine, the audience would take tea there. Young men and women – Jim, Iris, David, Jessica – were even now busy with garlands of red and white paper roses left over from the coronation.* The seeds and the dust from the sacks made them sneeze. Iris had a handkerchief bound round her forehead; Jessica wore breeches. The young men worked in shirtsleeves. Pale husks had stuck in their hair, and it was easy to run a splinter of wood into the fingers.

“Old Flimsy” (Mrs Swithin’s nickname) had been nailing another placard on the barn. The first had been blown down, or the village idiot, who always tore down what had been nailed up, had done it, and was chuckling over the placard under the shade

of some hedge. The workers were laughing too, as if old Swithin had left a wake of laughter behind her. The old girl with a wisp of white hair flying, knobbed shoes as if she had claws corned like a canary's and black stockings wrinkled over the ankles naturally made David cock his eye and Jessica wink back as she handed him a length of paper roses. Snobs they were – long enough stationed, that is, in that one corner of the world to have taken indelibly the print of some three hundred years of customary behaviour. So they laughed – but respected. If she wore pearls, pearls they were.

“Old Flimsy on the hop,” said David. She would be in and out twenty times, and finally bring them lemonade in a great jug and a plate of sandwiches. Jessie held the garland; he hammered. A hen strayed in – a file of cows passed the door, then a sheepdog, then the cowman, Bond, who stopped.

He contemplated the young people hanging roses from one rafter to another. He thought very little of anybody, simples or gentry. Leaning silent, sardonic, against the door, he was like a withered willow bent over a stream, all its leaves shed, and in his eyes the whimsical flow of the waters.

“Hi – huh!” he cried suddenly. It was cow language presumably, for the particoloured cow who had thrust her head in at the door lowered her horns, lashed her tail and ambled off. Bond followed after.

“That’s the problem,” said Mrs Swithin. While Mr Oliver consulted the *Encyclopaedia* searching under “Superstition” for the origin of the expression “Touch wood”, she and Isa discussed fish: whether, coming from a distance, it would be fresh.

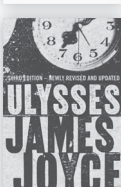
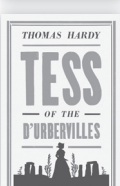
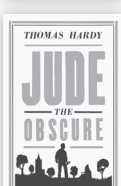
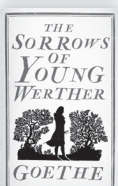
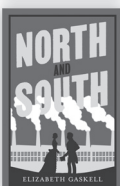
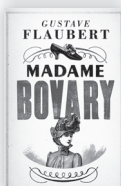
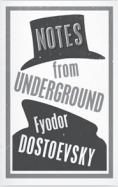
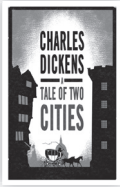
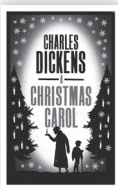
They were so far from the sea. A hundred miles away, Mrs Swithin said – no, perhaps a hundred and fifty. “But they do say,” she continued, “one can hear the waves on a still night. After a storm, they say, you can hear a wave break... I like that story,” she reflected. “Hearing the waves in the middle of the night, he saddled a horse and rode to the sea. Who was it, Bart, who rode to the sea?”

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