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Lark Rise to Candleford

Two Plays

Keith Dewhurst

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROMENADE PLAY

Lark Rise and *Candleford* were written to be performed as promenade productions. That is to say, there was no distinction between stage and auditorium; the seats were taken out, the audience was free to walk around and the actors performed the play in the middle of them. Sometimes the actors could not even see the colleagues to whom they were speaking because there were too many spectators in between. This is obviously opposed to that conventional notion of theatre in which the audience sits more or less comfortably in rows and the curtain rises to reveal a picture of life from which the 'fourth wall' has been removed.

In fact that type of conventional theatre, like its great masters Ibsen and Chekhov, was the creation of the nineteenth century and of sophisticated electrical and scenic devices that for the first time in the two-and-a-half-thousand year history of drama produced a convincing imitation of 'real' appearances. The proscenium arch divided the space occupied by the actors from that occupied by the audience, and both actors and playwrights had to behave as though the audience did not exist.

If the play was 'real', writers could not use dramatic tricks that were 'unreal', such as the Elizabethan soliloquy, the asides of classical comedy, and a device like the Greek chorus, which speaks a running commentary directly to the audience. For the same reason, traditionally powerful effects like music and dance were rarely seen in a straight play, and the notion behind a work like Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, where the action moves swiftly from place to place and from one social class to another, so that the theatre can display an entire society, became almost impossible to realize in modern conditions: it was too expensive and the scenes took too long to change.

Plays were set in dining-rooms and studies, or an atmospherically lit garden, and presented great themes through everyday events. The spectacular, and thus the more popular broad-based, aspects of theatre were still seen in musicals and pantomime, but hardly at all in the modern 'serious' theatre, except for classical revivals. Yet the English dramatic tradition, from medieval mystery plays to Shakespeare and Victorian melodramas, is essentially epic and popular; it is rough and tumble, or else it would not have survived so long, and that is why its spectacular elements were bound to burst out again sooner or later.

At the same time we must not forget what a great deal was gained by the new drama of the nineteenth century: for authors, a sense of structure and the

very possibility of a steady 'serious' public; for actors, a coherent discipline, best expressed by Stanislavski, that enabled them to present what they knew to be artificial in a way that related to our notions of what is rational and realistic. Another legacy was bricks and mortar: hundreds of theatres, all over the world, many with marvellous gilt and plush, all valuable real-estate and all with proscenium arches.

And then along came cinema, with its seemingly absolute and overwhelming realism; and then television, which brought the cowboys and Indians into your living-room. So is it surprising that one of the most interesting developments in the contemporary theatre has been the uncoordinated but very definite striving of many people in many countries to break down the proscenium arch and make audience and actors share the same space and the same thrilling event?

As long ago as 1929, the director Tyrone Guthrie had steps built down from the stage to the stalls of the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, and twenty years later he saw his ideas realized in a literally concrete form when at his insistence the Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford, Ontario, was built as a theatre-in-the-round so it could present plays written in widely different conventions. What has happened in England since then is the subsidy-assisted boom of the 1950s and 1960s, which among other things enabled English writers to write epic plays again, and also financed dozens of new theatres, many of them with multi-purpose stages. Joan Littlewood made her great statements on the notion of a popular theatre, and in scores of fringe and studio theatres actors and audiences learned to confront each other at close range again. The theatre today is exciting precisely because many different of kinds of work exist side-by-side, and it is more than likely that if Bill Bryden and I had not done a production like *Lark Rise*, someone else would.

At the same time it marked a definite stage in work that as a writer-director partnership we have developed over a number of years: epic plays with music that have gradually evolved into a promenade style. If this style has other, conscious points of reference I would say that they are *Orlando Furioso*, the famous arena-style production by Ronconi which Bill saw at the Edinburgh Festival; *1789*, which I saw at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes in April 1971, and William Gaskill's *The Speakers*, a promenade production which we both saw, and about which I wrote an article in the *Guardian* in 1974. It was also William Gaskill who brought Bill Bryden and me together, in December 1970, to do an epic play called *Pirates*, in a Royal Court Sunday night performance without décor.

It is worth noting that three actors in *Pirates*, Jack Shepherd, Derek Newark and Brian Glover, appeared at one time or another in *Lark Rise*, and that members of the folk-rock group, Steeleye Span, played in both the play and the foyer.

In January 1971 we did a show in which we transformed the Theatre Upstairs into an army canteen with a boxing ring, for a performance of Brecht's *The Baby Elephant*, to which I added a cabaret-prologue about Brecht himself. The cast included three more actors, Dave Hill, Bob Hoskins and Mark McManus, who have appeared in Cottesloe plays; so the hard core of a company was formed a long time ago. In May 1971 we did *Corunna!*, a Napoleonic Wars ballad-opera for five actors and five musicians of Steeleye Span, among them Maddy Prior, who was in two Cottesloe plays, and Martin Carthy, who was in *Lark Rise*.

Corunna! was played on a central ramp with the audience in rows on each side, an arrangement that we repeated at the Cottesloe Theatre in November 1978 for *The World Turned Upside Down*. After a week at the Theatre Upstairs, *Corunna!* toured the kind of one-night-stand rock dates at which the band then appeared: from university unions to the concert room of the St George's Hall in Liverpool and a proscenium theatre in Harrogate.

Bill Bryden subsequently moved to the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, where in 1972 we did an adaptation with the regrouped Steeleye Span of R. L. Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, and although we played the climax of the play like a concert, with the actors facing out front on a row of chairs, I think we both felt that the proscenium arch was not really suited to that kind of work; our other joint show there, in 1973, was an orthodox version of Molière's *The Miser*. In 1974 I wrote a play with music for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and in 1977 Bill became the artistic director of the Cottesloe Theatre, the National Theatre's smallest auditorium, which in fact has a capacity of over 400 and is a multi-purpose space stunningly designed by Iain Mackintosh.

At Easter 1977 Bill, with his associate Sebastian Graham-Jones, was able to realize for one week in the Cottesloe a long-cherished project of excerpts, entitled *The Passion*, from the medieval English mystery plays. These were adapted by the poet Tony Harrison and had music by the Albion Band, whose leader Ashley Hutchings had played with Steeleye Span in *Corunna! The Passion* was done in full promenade style, and as a result of its success I was commissioned to adapt *Lark Rise* for performance in March 1978.

For some time we had discussed using books as the basis of plays, because a lot of our work, and crucially much of the fine integration of music and action, is done in rehearsal, so the basic property — as well as the trust of all the people in each other — needs to be very solid. Also, books bring an audience with them, and we have always reached for what is epic and popular, and used music and spectacle because when there is a band in the space the event takes on vital aspects of a concert: the immediacy and the ability to speak directly to the audience.

If one can generalize about the actors in what the press have called the "Cottesloe company", it is to say that they have been chosen because they are

high-energy character-players, strongly centred in their own accents, regions and experiences of life; and in the promenade their energy is more closely experienced than in any other kind of theatre.

The overall aim of the productions is to entertain without loss of seriousness or of high standards of text, acting and music: to create an experience that will appeal on different levels to as many people as possible. *Lark Rise to Candleford* is clearly ideal material for such an event. Flora Thompson was a writer of sharp honesty who described the epic transition from the ancient agrarian life to the modern world in simple everyday terms.

The only problem was that *Lark Rise* is a book without a narrative, whose chapters each describe a different aspect of life in the hamlet in which Flora grew up. The solution to this was to make the action of the play the events of a single day — the first day of harvest because that seemed the most typical — and to attach dialogue and scenes from all parts of the book to that thread. The music was a natural province of the Albion Band, and the flash forward to the Great War was obvious when one visited Cottisford Church and saw the memorial tablet mentioned at the end of the book. This visit also gave the designer, William Dudley, the idea for his magnificent set, for at Juniper Hill where Flora lived the impression of flat fields and sky is overwhelming, and this could be simulated in the design of the skycloth, wheat field and cottage. The part of the play that had to be most carefully written without betraying the spirit of the book was the sadness of the relationship between Flora's father and mother.

When we came to *Candleford* it seemed natural to contrast a day in summer with a day in winter. There is more narrative in the last book of Flora Thompson's trilogy; she combined two villages into one "Candleford Green", and the play concentrates on events which took place at one of them, Fringford in Oxfordshire, where Flora worked in the post office-cum-blacksmith's run by Mrs Whitton, fictionalized as Dorcas Lane. This play ends with a flash forward to Flora's own unhappy married life, a scene that I did not write in its present form until the preview before opening night.

When read, these plays seem more like film or television scripts than ordinary plays. That is because the promenade enables one to cut away and, if the actors pull focus strongly, to achieve very brief effects indeed. The plays are more subtly promenade than *The Speakers*, where the setting was Hyde Park, or *The Passion*, where it was the streets. In those plays the audience exist in the same time and place as the actors, but in *Lark Rise* the actors are in 1880 and the audience in the present, and this calls for true concentration: there is a great and gentle skill in making a person who does not exist move out of your way!

No doubt the plays would work in other arenas, but in the promenade the experience of each member of the audience is his or hers alone. No-one sees

all the play, although if it can be heard it can be followed, and some emotions must be read off the faces of other spectators. In a way each person is his or her own television camera, and at the same time part of the show. The audience and the actors create together an event that is a celebration of Flora Thompson. She was unique, a great writer, and what is celebrated is the common humanity that she shared with us, and with the Oxfordshire villagers, long dead.

KEITH DEWHURST 1980

Lark Rise was first performed in 1978 and I wrote this introduction for the original published edition of the plays in 1980. Because it still seems a very fair account of how the plays came to be written I have let it stand: my only regret is that apart from a lunchtime piece for the students of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in 1984, I have not had the opportunity to develop further the idea of promenade theatre.

KEITH DEWHURST 1995

MUSIC

In many cases specific dramatic effects were conceived with specific tunes in mind, e.g. the Battle of the Somme at the end of *Lark Rise* , and the plays will work much better if the original tunes are used.

Copies of all the music for *Lark Rise* and of music written for *Candleford* is available on hire from Samuel French Ltd. Other music for *Candleford* may be found in found in folk music libraries and hymn books.

LARK RISE

CHARACTERS

Laura, 10
Edmund, 8
Emma Timms, Laura and Edmund's mother
Albert Timms, Laura and Edmund's father

Farm labourers:
Bishie, Bill Miller
Boamer, Dick Tuffrey
Pumpkin, Tom Gaskin
Old Price
Old David, David's father

Mr Morris, Bailiff — "Old Monday Morning"

Fisher, youth
Stut

Mrs Spicer, leader of the women's gang
Mrs Blaby
Mrs Peverill
Mrs Miller
Old Sally, 80
Dick, her husband
Old Postie, the postman
Mr Sharman, the Major
Doctor
Carrier
Grandfather, Emma's father
Queenie Macey
Twister, her husband, gamekeeper
Jerry Parish, fish/fruit cart
Martha Beamish, 12
Mrs Beamish
Squire Bracewell
John Price, son of Old Price
Mrs Andrews
Garibaldi Jacket

Cheapjack
Tramp
Polly, John Price's girl
Landlord of pub
Algy
Mr Pridham, band singer
Rector
Sam
Cockie
Chad Gubbins

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I. Morning
SCENE 1
SCENE 2
SCENE 3
SCENE 4
SCENE 5
SCENE 6

ACT II. Midday
SCENE 1
SCENE 2
SCENE 3
SCENE 4

ACT III. Afternoon
SCENE 1
SCENE 2

ACT IV. Evening
SCENE 1
SCENE 2
SCENE 3
SCENE 4

LARK RISE

Commissioned by the National Theatre and first presented at the Cottesloe Theatre on 29th March 1978, with the following cast:

Old Price, Dick, Grandfather	John Barrett
Mr Pridham, Sam, singer	Martin Carthy
Boamer, Cheapjack	Warren Clarke
Singer	Shirley Collins
Mrs Peverill, Queenie Macey	Edna Dore
Laura	Caroline Embling
Mr Morris, Jerry Parish, Landlord	Brian Glover
Stut, Twister, Algy, Tramp	Howard Goorney
Old David, Major Sharman, Rector	Michael Gough
Fisher, John Price, Carrier	Glyn Grain
Albert Timms	James Grant
Edmund	Laurence Hardiman
Martha Beamish, Polly	Louisa Livingstone
Emma Timms	Mary Miller
Pumpkin, Doctor, Squire Bracewell	Derek Newark
Bishie, Postie	Trevor Ray
Mrs Blaby, Mrs Beamish, Garibaldi Jacket	Dinah Stubb
Cockie, singer	John Tams
Mrs Spicer, Old Sally, Mrs Miller, Mrs Andrews	June Watson

Directed by Bill Bryden and Sebastian Graham-Jones
Designed by William Dudley
Musical Director, Ashley Hutchings
Music by the Albion Band

LARK RISE

The band welcomes the audience into the space with a tune. When the Lights go down the actors form up in a photo pose, and as the Lights come up again, the band singers begin "Arise and Pick a Posy"

Song

Band Hark says the fair maid
The nightingales are singing
The larks are winging
Their notes up in the air.
Small birds and turtle doves
On every bough are building,
The sun is just a glimmering
Arise my dear.

Rise up my fair one
And pick your love a posy
It is the finest flower
That ever my eyes did see.
Yes I will pick you posies,
Sweet lily pink and rosy;
There is none so fair a flower
As the lad I adore.

Lennady, Lennady
You are a lovely creature,
You are the finest flower
That ever my eyes did see.

I play you a tune
All on the pipes of ivory,
So early in the morning
Before break of day.

Arise and pick a posy,
Sweet lily, pink and rosy;

It is the finest flower
That ever I did see.
Small birds and turtle doves
On every bough are building,
The sun is just a glimmering
Arise my dear.

The cast has now dispersed except for Laura, who is a small skinny girl of 10 with dark eyes and pale yellow hair

Laura (*to the audience*) The hamlet stood on a gentle rise in the flat, wheat-growing north-east corner of Oxfordshire. We will call it Lark Rise because of the great number of skylarks which made the surrounding fields their springboard and nested on the bare earth between the rows of green corn. For a few days or a week or a fortnight, the fields stood "ripe unto harvest". It was the one perfect period in the hamlet year. The 1880s brought a succession of hot summers, and day after day, as harvest time approached, the children of the end house would wake to the dewy pearly pink of a fine summer dawn, and the swizzh, swizzh of the early morning breeze rustling through the ripe corn beyond their doorstep ...

Laura's brother Edmund appears, yawning and rubbing his eyes. He is 8 years old, and tall for his age, with blue eyes and regular features

Oh, come on, Edmund. Come you on.
Edmund What are we goin' for?
Laura Mushrooms, Edmund.
Edmund (*excited*) Mushrooms?!
Laura Sssh! Mushrooms!

Laura and Edmund lose themselves in the wheat-field that is the audience. The light is the pearly pink of dawn

ACT I

SCENE 1

It is morning. In the end house, Laura's father, Albert Timms, is eating a piece of bread and lard. He is a slim, upright man with fiery eyes and raven-black hair. He wears strong, light-grey worsted clothes because his work is dusty. He is a stonemason and walks three miles to his employers in the market town. He dislikes living in the hamlet and considers himself better than his neighbours

Albert looks round for his dinner basket but can't see it. He calls upstage to his wife Emma

Albert Emmie! Emmie!
Emma Sssh ... !
Albert Where's my dinner basket?
Emma You'll wake up Laura and Edmund.
Albert Oh, they be up and gone out, woman.

Emma comes downstairs. She is graceful and her copper-coloured hair hangs loose. She was once a nursemaid in a good family

Emma Gone out? Where? Are they after mushrooms again?
Albert Ay.
Emma Those fields are soaked with dew.
Albert Ay.
Emma Six-shillingsworth of good shoe-leather gone for six-pennorth of mushrooms!
Albert He's quick as a flash our Edmund.
Emma Course he is.
Albert We must apprentice him to a good trade. Carpenters, perhaps. A man with a good trade's *sure* of his living.
Emma (*giving him the packed dinner basket she has found*) You won't stay late tonight, will you? Not again?
Albert Stay late? With the likes of you waiting?

He kisses her. Their mutual attraction is strong

What was it that gentleman called you when you worked at the big house? Pocket Venus, wasn't it?

Emma Quite nicely, Albert. He was married with no nonsense about him.

They smile and kiss again

Albert I think we'll give notice on this place, eh? Move over to Candleford.
Emma Ay.
Albert When the old pig's killed I'll give notice.
Emma Ay.
Albert Can't never move with an old pig, can we?
Emma No.

He is ready. He picks up his dinner basket, his apron and tools, and slaps on his billycock hat

Albert How do I look, eh? Like a proper stonemason, eh?
Emma You won't stop late, Albert.
Albert I told you, woman.

Emma is upset by his burst of temper and grievance but determined not to part badly

Emma Now let's not part bad. Let's not make it like Dick's hatband, that went half-way round and tucked.

Albert also wants to part well. He sighs and gently kisses her

Albert You go back up, Emma, and have your beauty sleep.

Albert steps outside the house. All over the hamlet men are coming out of their cottages. They are farm labourers. The young men have drooping walrus moustaches, the elders a fringe of grey whisker beneath the jaw, extending from ear to ear. One or two old men still have smocks and round black felt hats but most wear corduroy trousers and an unbleached drill jacket called a "Slopps". Some have rush-plaited hats and some billycocks

Bill Miller (nicknamed "Bishie") meets Dick Tuffrey (nicknamed "Boamer") and his father Old David Tuffrey

Bishie Morning, Boamer. Morning, Master Tuffrey.
Boamer Morning, Bishie.
Old David Morning, young Bill.

Tom Gaskin, nicknamed Pumpkin, comes out of his cottage

Boamer Morning, Pumpkin.
Pumpkin Morning, lads.
Bishie Think weather's a-gooin' to hold?
Pumpkin Till us get 'un all in?
Bishie Ay.
Pumpkin Ay.
Old David Course it's a-gooin' to hold.

Albert walks in the opposite direction, towards the town. He would pass the men without speaking and they know it. They nudge each other and point

Bishie Look 'ee who's here.
Boamer Think he'll not speak nor nothin'?
Bishie No. Not him.

Albert walks past them without speaking

Pumpkin (*calling after him*) Morning, Mr Timms.
Albert (*stopping and turning*) Tom Gaskin?
Pumpkin Ay.
Albert Morning. Morning all.
Old David Morning.
Albert Morning.

He manages a nod and a smile for Old David. Then he strides off

Bishie Now let me ask you, Master Tuffrey — did you ever, in all your draggin'-up, see a man so stinking with pride?
Boamer Bricklayer calling himself a stonemason.
Old David Say what us will, I respect his missus.
Pumpkin Ay. Oh ay. But all the same she says his family kept an hotel in Oxford: but my wife's cousin knowed fer a fac' it weren't more nor a pot-house.

The men laugh. Old Price appears from his house

Old Price Morning, David.
Old David Morning.
Old Price Morning, boys.
Boamer Morning, Master Price. Think weather's a-gooin' to hold?
Old Price Till we get 'un in? Course it's a-gooin' to hold.
Pumpkin It'll hold fer you, Master Price, what's seen a few harvests in your time.

Old Price I have, Pumpkin: and I hope I'll see a girt lot more.

They all laugh

Bishie Look us all here now. Bailiff's a-waitin'.

Other men are congregating in the yard of the manor farm. The bailiff, Mr Morris, is a tall, shrivelled, nutcracker-faced old fellow swishing an ash stick. The men call him "Old Monday Morning"

Morris Hi men! Ho men! Monday morning. What do you reckon you're doing?
Pumpkin They're all a-coomin' up, Muster Morris!
Voices Morning, Sam. Morning, Cockie.
Morris Monday morning. Hi men! Ho men! Be ye deaf, or be ye hard of hearing, dang ye? Hurry up, men!
Bishie Hark at Old Monday Morning!
Morris Hi men! Ho! Call this harvest morning? Today's Monday, tomorrow's Tuesday, next day's Wednesday — half the week gone and nothing done!
Fisher Us've harnessed every team up, Muster Morris!

As Morris turns his back to look at Fisher, Boamer points at him with one hand and with the other slaps his own buttocks

Boamer My elbow to you, you old devil!
Morris What's that? What's that?
Boamer Just a-asking this little gallass what's the matter, Muster Morris.

The gallass is a youth nicknamed Fisher

Fisher Got my boots wet, Boamer — now 'um dried as stiff as boards.
Old Price Boots? Good thing you didn't live when breeches were made o'leather.
Bishie Have patience. Remember Job.

Laughter

Fisher Job? What did he know 'bout patience? He didn't have to wear no leather breeches.

His quickness draws a mildly jeering response. Then a latecomer arrives

Pumpkin Here's old Stut late for his own funeral ... Morning, Stut.

Old Stut M-M-Morning, P-P-Pumpkin.
Morris Hi men! Ho men! Now men! We'll put the mechanical reaper in Gibbard's Piece. Will your boots stop you driving the team, young Fisher?

Muttered voices

Bishie He's young Job!
Pumpkin Wooman's work!
Boamer Well, he's nothin' nor a boychap!
Fisher I'll see what I can do, Muster Morris, sir.
Morris I'll send the women's gang to bind up after you. Mrs Spicer? Ho! Mrs Spicer!
Mrs Spicer Here I be, Muster Morris! (*The leader of the women's gang, she is formidable in a pair of her husband's corduroy trousers*)
Morris Hi there! Ho there! What?
Old Price Speak up, Mrs Spicer.
Mrs Spicer Eh?
Fisher Monday Morning can't hear you.
Old Price You're as hoarse as a crow.
Pumpkin As ugly as sin, more like.
Mrs Spicer You rub your mouth with salt, young Pumpkin!

The men thoroughly appreciate this exchange

Morris Gibbard's Piece, Mrs Spicer! Gibbard's Piece! Now men. Hi men! We'll set to with the scythes in Hundred Acre Field. What d'you think of that?
Bishie Set us more than us can do and us'll do it!
Pumpkin You'll not never need them jibberin' old Irish gypsies this year, Muster Morris!
Morris Farmer and his wife have provided some good ale as usual and I'll be riding round with it! I'll be riding, men! Have you chosen your King of the Mowers?
All Ay! We have that! Ay!
Morris Who is it?
Bishie Boamer!

Cheers and a bit of backslapping

Old Price Wert up, Boamer lad!
Boamer Thank God for having growed the corn up right, Muster Morris, for us'll bring 'un down all right, eh, boys?
All That us will! Good old Boamer!

Morris You lead the line, Boamer. You say when they rest. You say what drinks they take. Monday morning! Ho there! Hi there!
Old Price Come on, Boamer, lad. On with your hat, then!

They put Boamer's flowered hat on him and then lift him on to their shoulders. He is then handed a sickle and repeats the ritual rhyme

Rhyme

I have lawns, I have bowers
I have fruit, I have flowers
And the lark be my morning alarmer.

To the parson his tithe
Here's good luck to the scythe
Success and long life to the farmer

Cheering, the men carry Boamer to the field, where they let him down and form up in a line with their scythes

Boamer Follow me, lads, for I'm your King of the Mowers!

Then they mow the wheat field in line to the accompaniment of the "Harvest Work Song"

Song

Men

When harvest come on and the reaping begins,
The farmer the fruit of the earth gathers in.
In mirth let us talk till the season be gone,
And at night give a holler till it's all of a row, till it's all of a row,
And at night give a holler till it's all of a row.

Then early next morning our hooks we do grind,
And away to the cornfields to reap and to bind.
Our foreman looks back and he leaves well behind,
And he gives a loud holler, bring it all well behind, bring it all well behind,
And he gives a loud holler, bring it all well behind.

O then says the foreman, behind and before,
We will have a fresh whet and half a pint more.

So me jolly boys to the end we will go,
To the end we will go till it's all of a row, till it's all of a row,
To the end we will go till it's all of a row.

When night it comes on to the farm we will steer,
To partake a good supper and to drink a strong beer.
In wishing the farmer such blessings in his life,
And in drinking a health unto him and his wife, unto him and his wife,
And in drinking a health unto him and his wife.

Our wheat is all in, oats, barley are bound,
Here's success to the farmer who ploughs through the ground,
As for this wheat stubble into turnips we'll sow,
And so we'll continue till it's all of a row, till it's all of a row,
And so we'll continue till it's all of a row.

Last refrain repeated as necessary

Scene 2

Laura and Edmund have returned to the end house and both they and their mother are enjoying the fried mushrooms. Emma is dressed now and her hair is parted in the middle and drawn down to a knot at the back. The children do not speak while eating

Emma Edmund. Sit up, Edmund!

Edmund sits up

Six-shillingsworth of good shoe-leather gone for six-pennorth of mushrooms!

Laura opens her mouth

Little girls should be seen and not heard.

Laura does not speak. She returns to her mushrooms. She finishes and looks at Edmund. He is still eating. Then Edmund finishes. Their mother looks at them

Now what d'you do?

Laura folds her hands to say grace. Edmund follows suit

Laura Thank God for my good breakfast. Thank Father and Mother. Amen.
Edmund Amen.
Emma Amen.
Laura I didn't wear no boots and gave Edmund my old ones.
Emma Going out without boots? You must be cold as ice.

Silence. Laura and Mother have not quite made it up

Edmund Mother.
Emma What.
Edmund What's the sea like?
Emma It's big, Edmund. Now don't go asking me questions.

Mother starts to clear the table. Laura helps her

Edmund Is it as big as Cottesloe Pond?
Emma Good Lord, yes.
Edmund How far away is it? Is it as far as Oxford?
Laura You've seen maps.
Edmund No, I haven't.
Laura I have.
Emma See what I've done, Laura? See what I've saved fer your father? Your two biggest mushrooms — 'cause of how he likes 'em so.

Laura smiles. She and her mother embrace each other for a moment. There is happy peace between them

Edmund Mother. What's Oxford like?
Emma It's a girt big town where you can earn five and twenty shillings a week and pay pretty near half in rent, so who'd want to go?
Edmund What do people do there?
Emma It's full of old buildings. It's where rich people's sons go to school, when they've grown up.
Edmund What do they learn?
Emma Latin and Greek and suchlike, I suppose.
Edmund Do they all go there?
Emma No. Some go to Cambridge.
Edmund Which shall I go to, when I grow up?
Emma You'll have to go to work, my little man. Brains ain't no good to a working chap. They make him discontented and saucy and lose him jobs.

She takes her mats and rugs outside the cottage and beats them. Other women are doing the same

Morning, Mrs Blaby.

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