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# Fresh from the Country

'Miss Read'



PENGUIN BOOKS

1818

FRESH FROM THE COUNTRY

'MISS READ'





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# FRESH FROM THE COUNTRY

ILLUSTRATED BY J. S. GOODALL



PENGUIN BOOKS

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*To Lil with love*



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One place suits one person, another  
place suits another person. For my  
part I prefer to live in the country,  
like Timmy Willie.

BEATRIX POTTER

*The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*

PART ONE

*Transplanted*





## I. Country Beginnings

'AND baths extra, of course,' said Mrs Flynn.

She crossed the diminutive landing in four steps and hurled herself against the bathroom door. It creaked, as if in protest, but remained closed.

'All our doors,' gasped Mrs Flynn, getting her shoulder to it, 'are well-fitting.' At the third shove the door groaned open and Anna Lacey peered over her prospective landlady's shoulder into a white-tiled cube of a room which reminded her of the small recess in the dairy at her farmhouse home where two milk churns habitually stood.

'It looks very nice,' said Anna politely. One of the frosted glass windows, studded with perpetual raindrops, was open, and through the chink she caught a glimpse of half-finished houses in another road on the new estate.

Mrs Flynn flicked a speck of dust from the green plastic towel rail and adjusted a mauve bath-mat, sprigged coyly with violets, which hung over the edge of the bath.

'And now I'll take you to the bedroom,' said Mrs Flynn, edging sideways past the girl and taking another four steps across the landing to an open door. She spoke, thought Anna, as though she were about to embark on a lengthy traversal of corridors and staircases rather than this shifting from one foot to the other in order to get from one room to the next in this doll-size house. Used as she was to the big shabby farmhouse on the Suffolk-Essex border, the toy-like dimensions of Mrs Flynn's establishment both fascinated and depressed her.

'This would be *all yours*,' Mrs Flynn announced, waving her hand, with a spacious gesture, at a strip of a room which was roughly the size of the broom-cupboard at Anna's home. The girl looked at it in wonder.

A narrow bed, covered with a fawn folk-weave bedspread, lay close against the wall behind the door. There was one small window placed high, directly below the eaves of the house, and under this stood a prim cane-bottomed chair. The only other piece of furniture was a small chest of drawers round which Mrs Flynn edged towards a cretonne curtain hanging across the corner of the room.

'And here's your wardrobe,' she said proudly. She twitched the curtain aside to show a rail containing three yellow wooden coat hangers. 'You've probably got hangers of your own,' added Mrs Flynn, looking suddenly anxious.

'Oh yes, indeed,' said Anna hastily. 'I could bring my own hangers.'

Despite the July sunshine the room seemed cold and dark, but the red patterned lino was well polished and the thin rug was clean. With a few of my own things about, thought Anna, it might not look so bleak.

She pressed back against the wall to allow Mrs Flynn to pass, and followed her downstairs. The sitting-room door was as stubborn as the bathroom one, the new wood protesting as Mrs Flynn forced it to give way.

She motioned Anna towards a small plump couch, which rested upon skittish surprised wooden legs, and seated herself in a chair which matched it. The room was sparsely furnished. Four pale pictures of pink and blue birds in flowery branches hung, one on each cream wall, very high up near the picture rail.

'From my *Woman's Monthly*,' said Mrs Flynn following the girl's gaze. 'And my nephew Ray passypartooed them.'

Anna switched her gaze to the tiled mantelpiece where a young man's photograph stood. He looked an unprepossessing youth in R.A.F. uniform, and glowered beneath a bar of black brows. His aunt's sharp little face had softened as she surveyed the boy, but now she turned abruptly to Anna and became her business-like self again.



'Three pounds a week is my charge,' said Mrs Flynn, 'and, as I said, baths extra.'

'I should be going home at the weekend - ' began Anna shyly.

'I'm afraid I couldn't make any reduction for that,' Mrs Flynn said, with a wintry smile. 'Not with the overheads.'

'I suppose not,' murmured Anna, wondering just exactly what overheads might be.

'You'd have your main meal at school, I've no doubt,' went on Mrs Flynn, 'and we usually have high tea when Mr Flynn gets in at seven. You probably get a cup of tea at school during the afternoon?' Her voice held a query.

'I'm not sure about that - ' Anna began.

'It's usual,' Mrs Flynn assured her swiftly. Anna, who was fond of her food and had the healthy appetite of one just twenty, wryly watched her meals being whittled away by Mrs Flynn's sharp business methods. She felt that she was no match for this woman, but knew that the headmistress's words to her an hour ago were true.

'Digs in this neighbourhood are few and far between. If Mrs Flynn can't take you you will have to face a bus journey each day. I'd try her for a bit,' she had said, and Anna had recognized the soundness of the case.

'I'll know more about that when I start next term,' said Anna. She was pleasantly surprised to hear how firmly this remark had come forth, and, much emboldened, she followed up her small advantage.

'I should need somewhere to work in the evenings. There will be books to mark and handwork to prepare, you know.'

'There's the bedroom,' Mrs Flynn pointed out. She sounded slightly affronted. Anna determined not to give way.

'But I shall need a table.'

'Then I suppose you might have the use of this room occasionally,' said Mrs Flynn somewhat grudgingly. 'It would be a little more of course. I hadn't bargained for letting two rooms.'

In fact, I think I shall have to speak to Mr Flynn before deciding about that.'

What a useful thing a husband must be, thought Anna! She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was an impressive object made of black marble in the form of a Greek temple. It began a preliminary whirring before striking three o'clock.

The girl remembered her long journey back to north Essex, collected her gloves and bag, and rose to her feet.

'I'm sure we shall be able to come to some arrangement about using this room,' Mrs Flynn said hastily, in a slightly more conciliatory tone, as she saw her prey escaping. 'But, you see, I must have somewhere to bring friends, and when Ray's here he likes somewhere to play his guitar.'

'Perhaps just one or two evenings a week it might be possible for me to use it,' suggested Anna. 'In any case, I'll think it over and let you know before the end of the week.'

Mrs Flynn jerked open the door and led the way to the front door.

'Holiday times,' she said, as she opened it, 'there would be a retention fee of ten shillings.'

'Oh yes,' said Anna, a little bewildered. 'Ten shillings for each holiday?'

'Ten shillings a week!' Mrs Flynn answered, with a hint of triumph. 'It's quite usual.'

'I'll remember,' said Anna.

Mrs Flynn accompanied her down the tiny tiled path to the gate. Under the hot July sun six young golden privet bushes were struggling for existence in the dusty new front garden, and a forlorn stick of a lilac bush drooped by the gatepost, its tag still fluttering from one twig.

'We should have a really nice hedge this time next year,' observed Mrs Flynn looking fondly at the privet.

'I'm sure you will,' agreed Anna bravely. And on this note of hope they parted.



Anna's spirits rose as she approached her home. The journey took over two hours from the new raw suburb where she was to take up her teaching appointment next September. She had travelled across the vast sprawling mass of London which sweltered in the throbbing heat and had felt the oppression of spirits which row upon row of streets always produced in her.

As the streets gave way to leafy suburbs and then to the gentle flat country of her own neighbourhood, happiness returned. The wind blew refreshingly through the open window of the Green Line coach, fragrant with the smell of freshly-cut hay and the flowers of many a sunny meadow.

The coach breasted a slight incline and Anna looked with love at the familiar view spread before her. Clumps of elms, blue-green with dense masses of leaves, made dark pools of shade among the wide pale fields of rural Essex. Away to the east the gentle blue of a cloudless sky met the darker blue of the horizon, and beyond that the North Sea heaved and murmured, tossing a lacy froth of shallow waves along the broad sands.

Westward, where Anna's farm lay, little streams made their leisurely way to greater water courses seeking the sea. Willows lined their banks, their silvery leaves shimmering in ceaseless quivering. To Anna, now waiting at the coach door ready to descend at her cross-roads, they seemed to be fluttering in welcome.

The Land Rover was waiting in the shady lane, her mother at the wheel. Anna bounded towards her, eager to tell her of all that had befallen.

Margaret Lacey, Anna's mother, was now approaching fifty, but her energy and youthful looks were the envy of many younger women.

She had been born just before the outbreak of the First World War within a dozen miles of her present home. Her father had been a miller and had lived and worked all his life in