RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Charmers

Stella Gibbons

Contents

About the Book

Thrown out of her long-established office job, Miss Christine Smith takes up a new role as housekeeper for a group of middle-aged artists. Charmed by a previous mystical experience, her spirituality is nurtured further by the tenants, who seem stuck in their own personal lull. Written in the 1960s, surrounded by social and political transitions, the novel focuses on change, or the lack thereof.

About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

Cold Comfort Farm

Bassett

Enbury Heath

Nightingale Wood

My American

Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm

The Rich House

Ticky

The Bachelor

Westwood

The Matchmaker

Conference at Cold Comfort Farm

Here Be Dragons

White Sand and Grey Sand

Starlight

To Spencer without whom …

STELLA GIBBONS

The Charmers

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Chapter 1

“AND IT’S MISS Smith, isn’t it? Christine Smith. Do forgive me, but we’ve had so many replies, and quite a lot of them were Smiths. Your letter is on that table somewhere, but—”

She glanced, rather hopelessly, across the room. “I only moved in myself three days ago, and I haven’t even started to get straight.”

She wore a sad-coloured dress of a material resembling sackcloth, which was fashionable that spring, and no jewellery except an outsize brooch with a sullen look on its copper face, but the impression she conveyed was winning; her indistinctly-uttered words sounded softly, and her movements were restfully slow.

“Yes, I’m Christine Smith.” The words were perfectly distinct and the tone bright. “Oh, I know what it is—moving. I’ve just been—I moved out of my old home some months ago and—”

“Yes. Well, I’d better tell you a little more about what we want.”

Another glance, towards the window this time, and then, after a pause, large eyes came to rest on Christine Smith’s face.

“Five of us, you see, very old friends, who’ve known each other for ages and ages, decided it would be cheaper and more fun to live together. So we put our money into this old place and we’re having it made into four flats—no, five, with yours— Oh, and the big kitchen, and a music-room. That won’t fit into anyone’s flat, you see, so we’re having my piano in it and we shall use it for a kind of communal sitting-room when we feel like it. We, Antonia

and I, that's Miss Marriott, she lives in London, she found this place for us, decided we must have a *housekeeper*. It will be nice to have an evening meal always on tap—unless we're all out, of course. Breakfast and lunch, and if anyone wants to eat things at tea—I know Diana Meredith can't live without hers—we'll do that ourselves. It's the evening meal, and getting someone in to clean the stairs and so on, and *managing* the house. And the catering. You see, we all do something artistic. I draw, and Miss Marriott designs clothes for Nigel Rooth's, and Clive Lennox, I expect you've heard of him, yes," (as Christine Smith vigorously nodded) "of course, he acts, so none of us want to cook in the evening. I don't quite know what Diana and James Meredith do, admire the rest of us, I suppose. Diana did do pottery at one time but she's been stuck down in the country for years and she's given it up, I think. Well, I think that's all. Six guineas a week and the flat."

She stopped abruptly, peering short-sightedly into the other's face.

The large, stately room was warmed by a stove, with a pipe which stood out from the fireplace; well-warmed, and quiet. Its windows, set in a wall papered in a design of white and blue stars on brown, overlooked a square where old white houses glimmered behind budding trees and where, at this hour in the afternoon, not much was going on.

The room was disorderly, filled with the picturesque objects that an artist—of the older generation, at least—might be assumed to have collected during a working lifetime, and the light falling into it was a pale clear orange; thin, yet serene with the promise of summer sunsets to come. A warm, quiet, oddly attractive place, and noticeably unlike the living-room at Forty-Five Mortimer Road, Crouch End, N.

Christine Smith leant slightly forward.

"Are you—offering me the job?"

Mrs. Traill nodded, looking a little bewildered, as if the situation had come to this point quicker than she had expected or meant.

"I suppose I am, really. Yes, I am. Would you like to come?"

"I'd like it very much," Miss Smith said decidedly. "But you'll want to take up references first, won't you? I did give you the name of my employers, in my letter. Lloyd and Farmer, the big office-equipment firm on Ludgate Hill. I was with them for nearly thirty-five years."

"A long time," Mrs. Traill murmured, looking at Christine Smith, for the first time, as if she truly saw her.

"Yes. I never was in another job, went there when I was eighteen. But they were reorganizing, and couldn't fit me in."

Neatly incised in memory was Mr. Richards' face, as he sat at his desk that morning, explaining that it was really a question of her age. Very nice, he had been. He did not get on with his wife, it was rumoured. Mr. Richards.

"Mr. Richards, he's the manager, I know he would give me a reference, he said he would."

Mrs. Traill put on another kind of face from her usual one and said, "I don't like references, they seem kind of squalid, somehow. I mean, if we can't trust each other—" and she smiled. She was lovely when she smiled. Tiny lines and deep ones suddenly, fascinatingly, appeared in the porcelain of her skin, and her wide eyes grew wider.

Christine Smith said nothing. The remark seemed to her plain silly. But she had offered a reference, and if it was declined, that was her prospective employer's affair. She waited, alert and cheerful, for what was to come next.

Mrs. Traill leant forward and lightly put her hand, with its raspberry nails and faint brown blotches and another cross-looking lump of copper (a ring, this time), on hers.

"I knew, from the minute I saw you that you were *the right one*. You're so *cheerful* and *placid*. I felt at once that

you’re going to be the person to manage the house for us, and keep us all in order (I’m afraid we’re rather scatty). Like an old-fashioned nannie.”

Christine gave a little laugh. It was only slightly embarrassed, because she had expected the people who had drafted that advertisement to be unconventional—artistic types always were. But in Mortimer Road jokes about nannies had not been made, and Mortimer Road would have thought this a queer sort of interview; interviews for jobs were among the serious things of life, together with money, and domestic electrical equipment.

“I don’t know about that,” she said, “but I like the sound of the job and it will be nice to have my own place; I’ve been living in a bed-sitter—”

“Dreadful, so depressing. And so expensive round here.” Mrs. Traill’s tone was absent, for what did it matter how Christine Smith had been living when she was here, and firmly secured, in the neat black and white tweed and good walking-shoes, with her thick greying hair cut short and firmly curled about her ordinary but slightly-rosier-than-ordinary face?

That complexion must be a nuisance, get too red sometimes, mused Mrs. Traill, who had never yet conceded a physical inch to another woman in the battle of looks.

“Now, when can you come?” she said.

Miss Smith was about to reply, “Any time that suits you, I’m free now,” when Mrs. Traill drifted on, “The Men are still in the house, of course. It makes everything *fearfully messy* but I rather like it, they’re so *vital*. Mike, he’s the foreman, says they’ll be out by the twentieth. The others are moving in on the twentieth, so—” she hesitated, gazing out of the window, as if her eye had been caught by the sunset.

“Then suppose I come on the twentieth, early,” Miss Smith spoke more decidedly than usual, for being artistic was one thing and dithering was another, “and then I can

get things organized a bit, before your friends come." She paused. "Would it be convenient for me to see—the flat you said I could have?"

"Of course," Mrs. Traill got up. "It's right at the top. You do sound *sensible*, Miss Smith, and that's so *cosy* because we're all scatty, you see, and usually thinking about our creative work—I hope we shall all get on. I think we shall. I hope you don't mind stairs."

"Used to them," Christine briskly said. "Our house had fifty," and they began the climb.

Pausing when Mrs. Traill did, and looking about her, Christine Smith saw peach walls, their tint deepened by the light pouring through a landing window. Three doors, opening off the little square place.

"A bedroom, and a living-room, and this is your kitchen," said Mrs. Traill, opening them one by one. Christine only glanced in, and said nothing, as each closed on a vision of plain eggshell-blue distemper and—a spiffing electric cooker, embattled with gadgets from plate-rack to horizontally-opening door. Mrs. Traill did not notice that the rosy colour in Christine Smith's cheeks had deepened to burning crimson.

"Loo and bathroom on the next floor, they're *minute* but yours. No room up here and it would have meant endless fuss with pipes. We rather spread ourselves on your cooker, to make up." She glanced at Christine. "Do you like it?"

"It's very nice … I should think you get quite a view from here, don't you?" The unnoticed blush had faded.

"Over the Square to the Heath." Mrs. Traill was leading the way down again, and was absent in her manner, as she inwardly sketched a conversation with Antonia Marriott: *Never batted an eyelid when I showed her the flat, took it entirely for granted, didn't even react to the cooker, I sometimes think some people …*

But Christine Smith would have agreed with Kipling's advice in *How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin*— "I shouldn't

ask about the cooking-stove, if I were you”—because thirty-five years of her life had been given to people who had felt for electric cookers, and radios, and electric fires and irons and toasters, and, later on, for tape recorders and television sets, what most people feel for their families or their God.

But this, she thought, following Mrs. Traill downstairs, will be my cooker …

In the hall, Mrs. Traill paused. She was a small woman, and she now looked up thoughtfully at Christine Smith.

“That’s settled then, isn’t it? You’ll come on the twentieth.”

“Yes. At eleven if I can get the removal people to give me a definite time. There’s a little place round the corner from where I’m living that does light removals.”

“That’s fine. Well … good-bye, then, until the twentieth. Oh, my ’phone number’s HIG 1111. Like me to write it down?”

“Whoever could forget that?” cried Miss Smith, with her first hint of a sparkle as distinct from an overall brightness, and Mrs. Traill laughed back, as she stood at the top of the steps, watching her walk away.

Down the flagged path, between the neglected beds where some greeny-yellow daffodils moved in the evening wind, out through the heavy gate of wrought-iron and into the Square, went Christine Smith. Dusk had fallen suddenly, and the old lamps, with their gentle glow, had come on, and now the five o’clock rush of traffic was in full cry. The rather sturdy figure walked briskly off in the direction of the bus-stop.

She seems a nice old thing, reflected Mrs. Traill, whose name was Fabia, beginning the climb up to her studio.

In fact, she was herself a little older than Christine Smith, but life, and travel, and being an artist, and a husband or so, and even details like her clothes, and what she ate and drank and read and listened to, had had the

effect of making her seem years younger. I’m usually right about people. I think she’ll do, decided Mrs. Traill.

Chapter 2

ALONE UNDER THE benevolent glow of the lamps, the rather sturdy figure opened her bag and took out a new-looking cigarette-case and a mildly expensive lighter. The smoke went down into her lungs with the sensation of mingled discomfort and satisfaction that was becoming familiar. She coughed.

Christine doesn't smoke. It's such a relief to us, when all the girls do nowadays.

The inward voice was old and contented. It had made that remark for more than a quarter of a century, following it with remarks about expense and, as time went on, about horrors which might result from the pernicious habit.

Christine turned her mind away from the voice, and looked down the hill in search of the bus.

It was easy to forget the kind of things Mother had said, because her mind was full of her flat: three rooms, and Oh, the cooker. Not all those years, during which the sight of the newest electrical device had instantly alerted a number of emotions, none of which were agreeable or fully acknowledged, had been able to spoil her first sight of that cooker. I'll cook very … I'll cook some … I'll *cook*, thought Christine Smith.

Her cigarette went out while she was on the bus, to the amazement of the conductress who, the downward-going vehicle being almost empty at this hour, had dared to sit down for three minutes.

"It's gone out," she said, watching, but not believing, as Christine ineffectually puffed. 'Cor, see mine go out. I hardly get lit up when it's done. Want a light?"

“Oh, I’ve got a lighter, thanks all the same … I’m nearly home when I get down, I won’t bother.” The bus stopped, and she swung herself neatly off, and away across the dusky, roaring road. The conductress rang the bell as three late, shrieking schoolgirls scrambled aboard.

“*Oh* I’ve got a *lighter*, thanks all the same,” mimicked the conductress to herself. “There are some types about.”

Christine left the High Street and its towering block of new offices, standing arrogantly over the derelict Victorian shops and houses, a streetful of which had been pulled down to make room for it; and made her way into the back streets.

Here, the coarse aggressive faces and the voices of almost unendurable harshness, and the glaring shops, and the reek and roar of traffic, were exchanged for a more bearable squalor, silent and almost dark. The houses were more than a hundred years old, two-storeyed, faced with grey stucco, shabby and dirty, but restored to much of their first modest domestic charm by the dimness, for most of the faint glow illuminating the street came from their windows. Halfway down, a dark passage occurred between them, running between high walls, and Christine unhesitatingly turned down it.

Her footsteps sounded loudly on the paved way, echoing back from the ancient, filthy bricks, that were scrawled in white chalk with moon-faces and the brief feuds and love-affairs of the local children. The still, sharp air smelt of soot and cats.

The street into which she came out was wider, and cleaner, and lit by a shadowless orange glare; at one end of it a high hill, black against the dimmed afterglow, unexpectedly loomed, as if the beholder had been suddenly transported to Innsbruck or Surrey. Christine gave a last glance at Parliament Hill (this was the apparition’s name) as she shut her front door.

But it was not truly her front door, and in the hall she came face to face with her landlady.

Under the glare of a light with a fringed and patterned shade, on the dazzlingly-patterned linoleum, against the wallpaper crawling with what looked like stylized germs stood Mrs. Benson. The hall was bright, and gay, and challengingly clean. “Go on, dare you to find a speck of dirt,” it shouted.

Mrs. Benson looked at Christine Smith from under her terrible tower of brass hair.

“How djer get on?” she demanded. She had, to do her justice, meant to say, “So you got back, then,” but curiosity, which gnawed her from half-past seven in the morning until twelve at night, would have its passionate way.

‘Oh … thank you … it seems very nice … they offered me the job and I’ve taken it.”

“Quick work.” Mrs. Benson would have preferred to hear that it was a rotten kind of job but Christine had had to take it because there didn’t seem to be anything else going. “Made up your mind all of a sudden, then,” she went on.

“Yes.”

Christine and Mrs. Benson looked at one another.

Mrs. Benson did not like Christine, and Christine detested Mrs. Benson. Lacking the inexhaustible bank-balance of birth, she did not feel herself untouched by Mrs. Benson’s curiosity, grudgingness, and spite, and she clung in Mrs. Benson’s presence the more tenaciously to her own lady-like imitations of what she deeply admired. Mrs. Benson, more simply, thought that Christine was stuck-up.

But she was a little embarrassed by the naked stare of clear brown eyes. Such a look, who does she think she is? said Mrs. Benson’s own eyes. “When you thinking of going?” she demanded. “I can let that room of yours tomorrow.”

Her lodger nodded, recognizing her resentment at losing a tenant who expressed no word of regret at going.

“On the twentieth.”

“You’ll be going to Drake’s, then. Better get round there quick, if you are. He was telling me yesterday he’s that busy he don’t know whether he’s coming or going. I’d pop round this evening, if I was you.”

Is this good-nature on Mrs. Benson’s part? Or is it a lifetime’s habit of arranging other people’s affairs for them? We must be careful here, remembering that Mrs. Benson is not just a cow; she is a sacred one.

“Oh, tomorrow will do, I think, thanks all the same.”

Christine was turning away to the door of her room when, suddenly, and with the force and colour of a vision, a picture entered her mind: with such strength and authority that afterwards she wondered if it could possibly have been a Message from Mother and Father, who perhaps Knew Better now, and wanted her to be free at last of Mortimer Road?

She saw her furniture, the pieces she had chosen before the sale, and sent away in a van to be stored at Messrs. Jeffrey’s emporium somewhere out at Enfield: the Sideboard, the Dining-Room Table, her Bed, the familiar pictures no one had ever looked at, Father’s Chair, and the Best Bedroom Carpet—she saw them all, in their hallowed associations and venerable comfort sitting in those three rooms with their walls of birds-egg tint in Pemberton Hall. For an instant, she experienced a pure, overwhelming feeling of repudiation. *No*, said her spirit.

She did not stop to think. Turning to Mrs. Benson, who had also moved away in the direction of her own quarters, she cried, rather than said, so excited and high was her voice:

“Oh—Mrs. Benson—would you like to have my furniture?”

Mrs. Benson turned, face alight with greed and suspicion.

"'Ow do you mean, have? Store it 'ere—or buy it off of you? I can tell you here and now I've got no room for storing, in my place. And I've not money to buy second-hand stuff, neither."

"No—not store it or buy it. Have it. As … a present."

"I don't need anyone's old bits and pieces thank you … What is there, then?"

Christine rapidly ran through the list, with every second feeling more strongly impelled to get rid of it all, and with every other second crushing down the sensations of guilt.

"Quite a flatful," was Mrs. Benson's comment. "They giving you your own place, up at this place, then? I said to Stan, 'I'm sure she's got her own stuff, in store,' I said. They don't half charge you in those places neither." She paused.

Christine was now trying to work out how much of her share in the money from the sale of the house could be safely spared for new furniture … pale wood, against those walls … or … very dark perhaps? Second-hand 'finds', from junk-shops … she could glue, and polish, and re-cover … Yes, dark would look best.

"I don't mind obliging you, if you want a home for it," Mrs. Benson was saying. "My sister always says I'm a fool to myself. Soft. But I'm like that. I don't mind. I'll have it."

Christine was still inexperienced in the ways of the Benson world, and she felt that she had misjudged her landlady. She did not realise that her possessions were as good as reposing in Mrs. Benson's place from the first instant that the words 'have' and 'furniture' had penetrated Mrs. Benson's consciousness.

It was arranged that the vanload from Enfield should be delivered on the afternoon of the twentieth.

Christine insisted on this, with adamant firmness. She did not want to see the Dining-Table and its attendant

devoted crew being decanted into the road outside the Benson ‘place’, grandly unconscious of the ruthless way it had been disposed of.

Mrs. Benson agreed. If there “was some pieces that wasn’t too bad” among the vanload, she did not want to have to admit as much to their donor, and thank her. *Gratitude*, in Mrs. Benson’s view, was among the dirty words: it was as well that her tenant should leave before the furniture arrived.

Christine went into her chilly, be-patterned, too-clean bed-sitter, and cut bread and butter and boiled a kettle, and dined.

She felt tired, which was not usual with her. It had been quite an exciting afternoon, what with seeing those greeny-blue rooms and the cooker, and taking on a new job, and then giving away the furniture—actually *giving it away*, all that was left, in the material sense, of Forty-Five Mortimer Road—although, in another sense, the house and its contents and inmates were still—could *spitefully* be the word?—alive and kicking.

They were kicking her spiritual shins, as she sat at the table drinking tea and eating bread and butter; kicking away, and muttering over and over again, *faithless, unkind, disloyal*, and plucking with the experienced hands of many years practice, every muted chord of love and grief in her heart.

No, ‘spitefully’ was not the word, of course, what a silly idea. She must not take it all so seriously. And she even succeeded in making some timid excuses for herself after she was in bed; thinking that, after all, no one could say she had not been a good daughter to them; and surely someone might be permitted to feel tired, and excited, when, after fifty-three years of life, of which thirty-five had been passed in earning money to buy more and more electric toasters and irons—that someone had shaken the very last survivors off the raft, and firmly kicked the raft

itself off into the troubled sea, and was, for the first time, truly Leaving Home.

Chapter 3

BUT SHE AWOKE with the shocked realization that now she had no furniture, and, in that first moment, even considered asking it back from Mrs. Benson.

At once, she knew that this was impossible.

Encountered later, on the previous evening, Mrs. Benson had already shown an altered manner, replacing rudeness by the condescending familiarity befitting a benefactress, one who had done that soft fool, what had given all her stuff away, a good turn. Christine, no weakling, did not like to imagine the scene were she to suggest going back on her word.

She *would* have to go to the junk-shops. Quite an adventure, that would be.

She had glimpsed them occasionally, here and there, as she went home by bus on summer evenings, cosily peopling them with types she had read about in fiction a quarter of a century old (Christine, and Mortimer Road, did not read anything contemporary except the headlines in the papers).

A junk-shop was dark, and dirty and cavernous, with a vaguely Oriental atmosphere imparted by a gilt Buddha seated in its shadowiest corner, and some alabaster godlets with chipped noses displayed on a tray outside. Inside, there were desks and tables and chairs, decrepit but fine old pieces, of which the proprietor did not realise the value. They were, nevertheless, easily repairable by an amateur. The proprietor was male, and slightly mysterious.

The shops explored by Christine on that morning were certainly arranged to appear alluringly cavernous, but they were neither shadowy nor dirty, and in charge there was a

Character, bearing small resemblance to Little Nell's Grandfather and dyed deep in the sacred consciousness of Personality.

These Characters saw slap through her or thought they did, at the first peep; and indeed, they saw that she knew nothing about second-hand furniture, which was all that concerned them about Christine Smith, and they at once rattled off an imposing history of whatever object she happened to be looking at.

"Yes," they invariably began, "that's a …" and away they went; date, period, maker, type, variation if any, rarity or otherwise, had a lady in yesterday was crazy about that, and suddenly, accompanied by a holy kind of smile—wham! the Price.

Those well-informed articles in the more expensive women's papers and the informative little talks over the air had done their work. Little Nell's Grandfather knew exactly what he was selling and what the time of day was, and Christine ate her lunch at an Italian restaurant in Camden Town feeling vaguely snubbed and disappointed. But she was accustomed to both sensations and hardly noticed them.

Was it because she had made so many tiny decisions, over so many years, so carefully, that she now seemed able to make large ones casually?

Anyway, she came out of that restaurant determined not to waste any more time hunting for junk. She would buy some new furniture. Modern, perhaps, really modern.

She turned aside into the premises of a large local firm that was both old-established and progressive, and at once saw something she liked very much.

Mansfields had tried the experiment of placing an order with a Scandinavian firm, which designed and made a series of light, angular pieces in birchwood, processed to give it the silvery-pink hue associated in popular imagination with the trees, and it was this 'line', cunningly

displayed against a drop-scene vaguely Northern, that had caught her eye.

She bought two chairs, and a table, a bed and a chest of drawers and a wardrobe and a bookshelf, lean and elegant, the sparry crystalline grace of the snowflake translated into wood, and they cost her three hundred pounds of her money and she came out of the department feeling rather as she used to at the Office Party every Christmas, when she had had some sherry.

On her way through the Soft Furnishings she saw a curtain material, trails of bright green ivy on a white ground, and felt that she must have it, so she bought twelve yards. That ought to be enough, and if there's any over, I'll just have cushions, thought Christine, flown with furniture and looking rather glassy about the eyes … Lots of cushions.

She also bought three pairs of sheets and some fluffy green-blue blankets and a saucepan or so. She ordered the curtain material to be sent to her sister's house at Edgware, and then rang her up, to announce its forthcoming arrival.

Mary Smith had early escaped from earning money to buy toasters by marrying and passing this task over to her husband. The eldest of her three clever sons had just left home and was training for a job, and she would have time to machine Christine's curtains.

She would be glad to do it, not only because she was fond of her sister, but because all the married Smiths (there were three of them) regarded Christine with suppressed and largely unconscious guilt because she had borne the heat and burden of the Forty-Five Mortimer Road day for so long. They had an uneasy feeling that they owed her something. "The same stuff for all three rooms?" asked Mary. "Even in the kitchen? I always think gingham looks nice in a kitchen. So fresh. Linda was looking at a lovely pattern of chianti bottles and French loaves the other day.