

THE PATH OF THE GALE



Philippa Powys

The Sundial Press

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TO

MY FRIENDS

OF

THE LEE SHORE

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CHAPTER IV

Not two, but three

Lizzie Henchman was inside washing. This caused the new Bailiff of the farm, who approached the cottage on horseback, to think there was no one within. Riding down to it from the hill above the young man was impressed by the pleasant position in which the small house was situated. He was attracted by the manner the low grassy under-cliff sloped away to the beach from the edge of the garden, and by the way the trees and bushes sheltered it from the raids of the prevailing southwest winds.

As he came still nearer, the charm of the cottage increased. He observed each detail, the brown thatch, the small lead windows, the hens hurdled by the railings, and with the sound of the sea ever recurring. His soul felt pleased. Though he earned his bread by farming his sensibility towards the life was remarkably acute. He was a man who said little, but observed much. He had taken to the land so as to escape the close confinements of an office. His nerves obtained repose from the natural routine of the country. The animals filled the lack of a more personal love. He was one to brood if he had not constant employment.

Meanwhile under the lean roof of the back kitchen, Lizzie continued her washing. With her arms steeped in water and soap she worked with swift ease, except at intervals when she would look away through an overgrown hedge to a far bend in the shore. Here two or three more houses stood, a dry reef of low rocks showed that the tide had receded. It lay black with seaweed, a contrast to the green of the

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grass which reached to the very edge of the sea. The waters of the bay lay white and dazzling. They heaved in unbroken ripples. Lizzie felt radiant. The view worked harmoniously upon her spirit even as the wet soap-suds soothed her mind. She felt capable of facing anything that might fall to her lot; to work or to love.

As she wrung out her clothes from one bath to another, she wished that Dick had not chosen that day to go to the neighbouring sea town. She wanted his company, someone to chat and to laugh with her. Her mood was bright. She was ready to respond to happiness, even as the sea did to the sun.

In the consciousness of his absence, her mind began to skim the air with wishes. How pleasing it would be if someone now appeared who was friendly and was unconnected with her duties. She had never "walked out" with any particular lover.

yet at this moment she longed for some proclaimed companion. She was now desirous to love, as a seagull, when it spreads its wings and mounts before the incoming breeze. It was, therefore, with a real pleasure that she caught the sound of someone trying to attract her attention from the front.

As Lizzie shook the suds off her hands and dropped her coarser apron, she heard the call again. She hurried the faster around the house, where she found the new bailiff of the farm standing at the little gate, holding his horse by the rein.

He appeared slim, with a stoop in his shoulders, which gave the effect of a weakness in the spine, His hands and face instead of being tanned and sunburnt, were long and delicate. Though the expression of his eyes was evasive, they possessed kindness. She noticed he hesitated at first when he spoke to her.

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"I am — I am sorry to trouble you, but I want to see Dick Vye. I believe he lives here."

"Yes," Lizzie answered, still with the gate between them. "Only he is away at present."

"How unlucky! Mr. Shutter wished me to see him about an old horse he wanted destroyed."

"I can give him any message, but I don't expect him back yet."

"I really ought to speak to him about it myself. Perhaps I can call later."

Behind his eyes was suggested a new meaning. Instinctively Lizzie knew he wished her to make some sign that she wanted him to come again. She decided to chance it. She liked his appearance and the manner in which his arm rested on the neck of the horse. She took the matter in her own hands.

"If you really want to see Mr. Vye you had better come about tea time tomorrow. He'll be in then."

"Tomorrow? What not today?"

"You see, there's no dependence on when he'll come back. He's like all men, he'll hang on to the last minute when once away from home."

"There, I don't suppose another day will matter much. You'll be sure to tell him I'll come tomorrow," his mind going back to the need of the errand.

"Sure I will. Somewhere around tea-time."

"Thanks so much," and a half smile loitered at his lips. He hoped it meant an invitation. He liked the attractive carriage of the girl, with her bright eyes and gay mouth. She warmed his heart as only a few could do. She seemed to embody the true spirit of her surroundings. It

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delighted him. He disliked anything false.

It was with a new lightness of mind that he found himself waving Lizzie goodbye before he started his pony at a canter up the hill.

"I should love to see her again. I wonder what her name is? How lucky for the fisherman to have such a girl to go back to. I envy him. I suppose she'll marry him. She's a danger to any man. I'll walk there, I won't ride. I wonder what it is like in the cottage?"

So his thoughts ran as he gave one final look back at the fascinating abode of the fisherman.

Meanwhile Lizzie exclaimed to herself, after she had seen the rider and horse become smaller and smaller until they reached the summit of the hill: "To think I should have seen the new bailiff. He's so different from anyone I have ever met, I really believe I could take to him, I hope he won't forget to come to tea tomorrow. If he does come I'll make sure to offer him a cup of tea."

Lizzie returning to her washing passed by the accumulated heap of driftwood. She paused to look at the sea and the footpath that ran near by. Her mind began to ramble again.

"I wonder when Dick will really be back. I wish he was here to dinner. I should love to ask him all about the bailiff. He doesn't look as if he were meant to farm. He reminds me far more of a person who writes books. He scarcely looks right on a horse. I like him. So different from old Tom."

At this thought she blushed.

"Though I wish he hadn't acted as he had that night. He's so clumsy in his love-making. I believe the new bailiff does like me. There's as much difference between them as chalk and cheese. I wonder what Dick would say; he'll have to look out if he wants me

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now. It is good to be alive."

Then as she swilled the clothing and hung it out upon the line, her imagination ran more and more upon the new farmer. His courtesy pleased her fancy. He appeared kind.

Here her eyes travelled the line of coast eager to discern the approaching speck of a figure which might prove to be Dick returning. The sea beyond was brilliant, it lay bright and blue like a vast garden flower. She watched the waves barely breaking against the low reef of rocks. She could see no one; the landscape was void of human life.

"There!" she ventured aloud, "it's a pity he's not here for dinner. I feel like a kitten. I long for someone to play with." And without another glance, she picked up the empty basket and ran back into the cottage.

CHAPTER V

The Hut

The light of the sun stretched far over the sea and rested upon the cliffs and upon the meadows which fell to the west. It touched the backs of the gulls as they stood huddled together beside the further rocks. Nothing of it escaped Lizzie Henchman as she gazed around her from the top of the undercliff on what was known as the Donkey Path.

Though the early morning air stirred her skirts and the handkerchief, which she was in the habit of winding gipsy-fashion, about her head, her face showed anxiety.

Lizzie had gone out to consider what the weather was likely to be for the day. She searched the sky for clouds or any indication of wet. She observed the waves over the vast expanse of water. She even turned to see if the animals fed on the hill-tops, or hid below the shelter of the hedges in the valley. All was apparently as it should be; she felt satisfied.

Lizzie turned around to cross back to the cottage with the opinion that it was really safe to venture the long walk across the cliffs to the small sea village lying to the east. But suddenly a new doubt arose making her hurry back to the place of vantage.

Once more Lizzie scanned the horizon. She saw the sunlight stream over the high bastions of the white promontory to her left. It shone across the undulations of the inner ridges. It renewed her faith, so much so, that she never observed the tiny cloud which slowly moved towards the land. It faded again quickly, like a fleck of a wave breaking out at sea.