

FUTURA

'A SPELL-BINDING READ'
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

Jacksleve



PATRICIA
WENDORF

Eliza Greypaull knew she was no beauty, but she was determined to make a success of the arranged marriage to her weak-willed, dissolute cousin Philip, for the future of Larksleve depended on it. The lush Somerset farm would divert Philip from the fleshpots of Taunton and would be a home for the next generation of Greypaulls.

Yet despite her gown of golden silk, and the dowry of sovereigns sewn into a velvet bag, she couldn't suppress a stab of envy at the glowing happiness of her friend Meridiana. Using gypsy spells and incantations, the impetuous Romany had ensnared the man of her choice, but she was to pay dearly for her love...

The coral pendant encircled these two families. Its powerful magic caused pain and joy in equal proportions, and its purpose would only be worked out over several generations.

'Most compelling reading...the characters are beautifully realized and contrasted' Rosemary Sutcliff

'Truly magical, the work of a very special kind of writer. I can't remember when I last read a story that so captivated me...I felt privileged to read it' Sarah Harrison



'Written with a native's instinctive feel for the language, traditions and landscape of the West Country' *Mail on Sunday*

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 Patricia Wendorf

Larksleve

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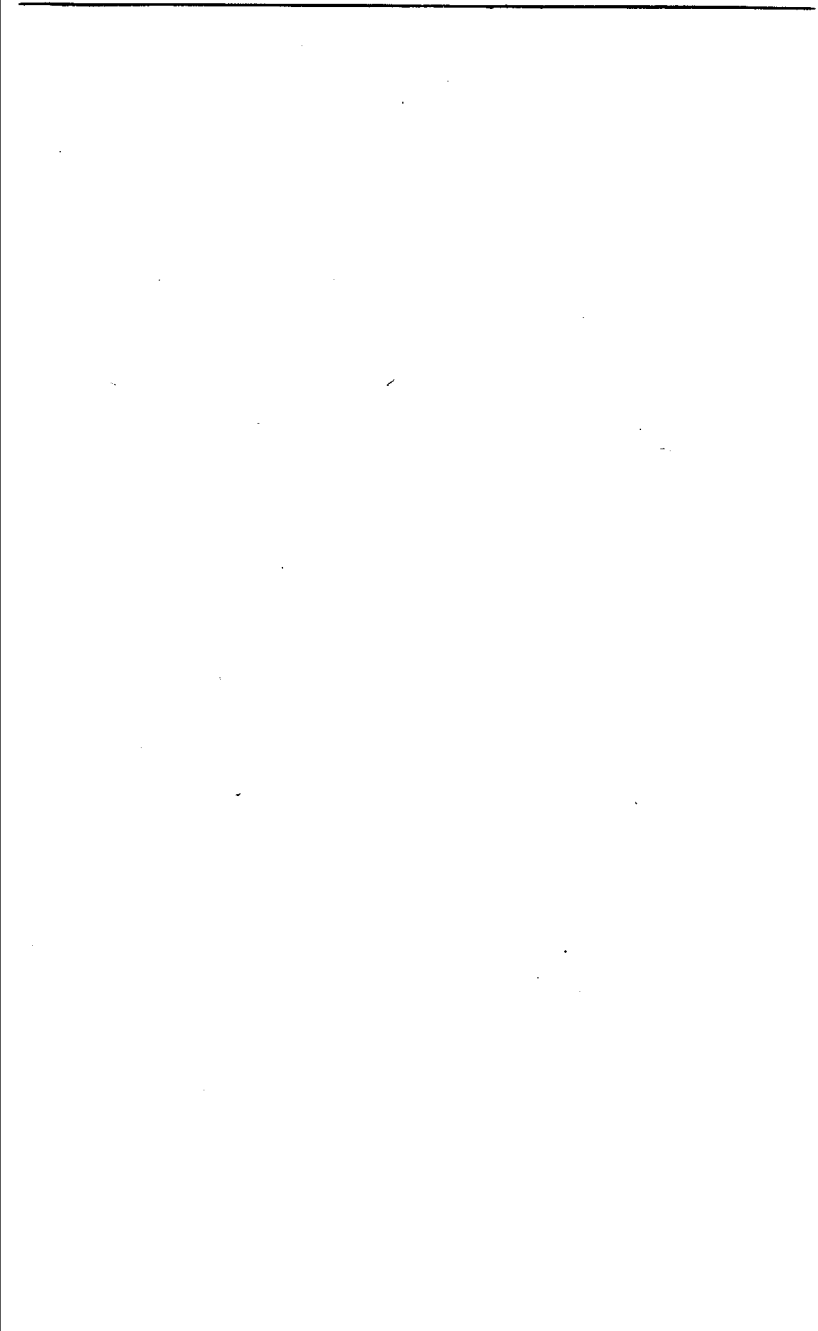
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For my mother



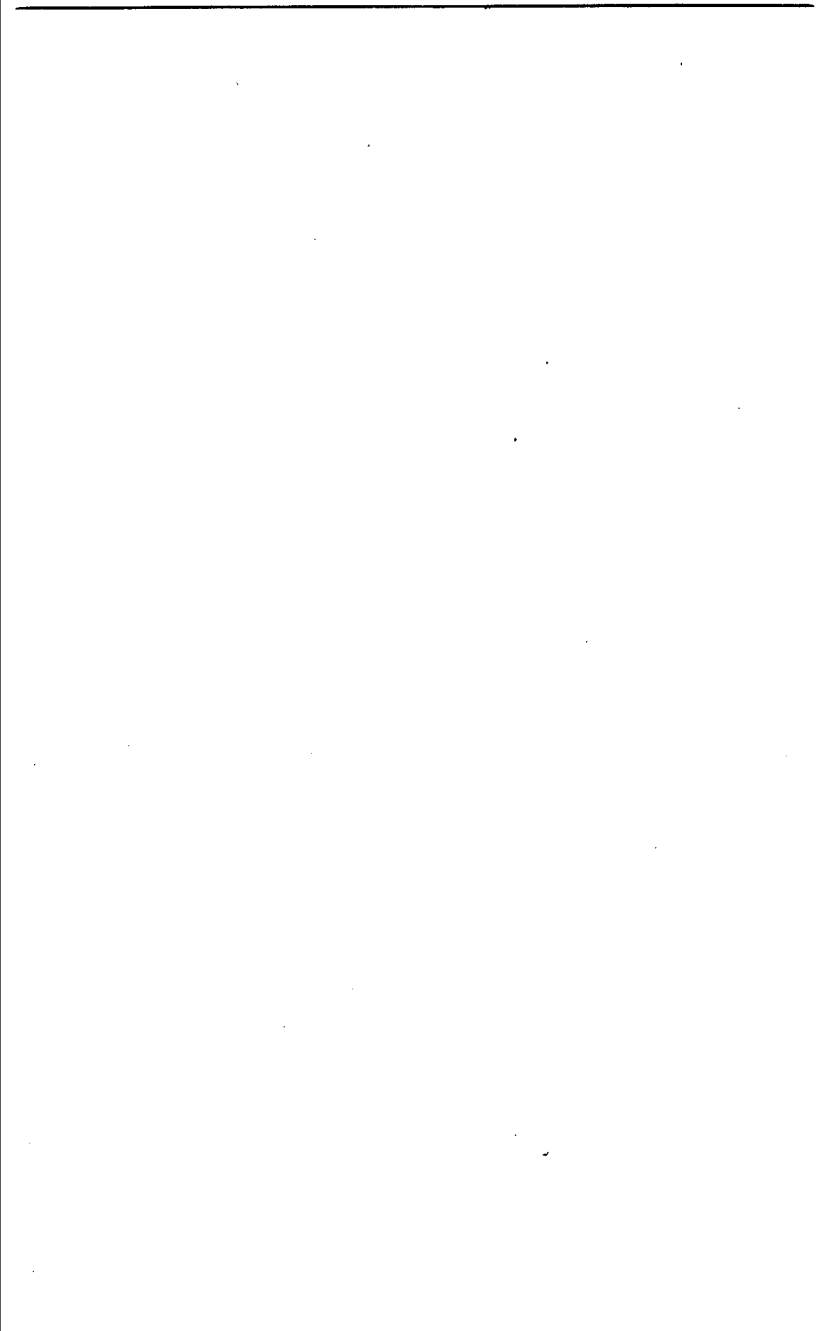
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PART ONE

They came down into Yeovil by way of Babylon Hill, anxious to be across the boundary, clear of the county of Dorset, and safely into Somerset before nightfall. Dorset was intolerant of travellers. Only last year a gypsy had been murdered on his way from the Packe Monday Fair in Sherborne.

They began the descent into the town, their wheels braked safely against the strong pull of the incline. The restraining dragshoes clattered against the flints and stones of the uneven surface, but the experienced mares were not easily panicked. The men walked beside the horses; the women trudged behind in the rear of the waggons. The children were growing weary, and they dawdled in the hedgerows. Dogs and goats were tethered, and they ran beneath and behind every flat-cart and caravan.

As the long bright straggle of waggons and coloured horses coasted down into Yeovil, the old cry flew up at their approach. 'Gypsies! The gypos are comin'. Lock your doors. Hide your children!'



Meridiana Loveridge walked behind the last waggon. She halted on the summit of Babylon Hill and looked down into Yeovil. The steep banks of Windham and the blue rise of Nine Springs held the town in a hollow palm. Somerset, a

green place; good cropping for the horses, fat hens and rabbits, sweet apples. She knew all its secret treasures. The dingles where the wild iris grew; the banks of wild orchid; the combes in the Blackdown Hills where the nightingale sang in the darkness.

Fever Hospital Lane was their regular camping site in Yeovil. A safe place to pitch, since the people of the town, fearing contamination, rarely strayed out into that direction. The waggons and carts wound down into the valley, and drew onto a dry, grassy clearing. The old hospital loomed dark through the elm trees; evening had come down swiftly, but within minutes there were several fires crackling, and the smell of frying bacon in the lane. Ten families were travelling together, and more were expected to join them along the way. This night-stop in Yeovil was to be their last pitch before over-summering in Buckland St Mary.

The winter had seen a thinning-out of their numbers. The damp and fogs of the previous November had carried off an uncle and a grandfather. The bitter frost and snows of January and February saw the premature births of three still-born babies. In March, two chavvies had died, suddenly drowned in their own blood. The gorgio doctor told the mothers that their children must have been consumptive for a long time.

They had burned the grandfather's and uncle's waggons, destroyed the clothes, and the bender tent in which the chavvies died. They had buried their dead in Dorsetshire churchyards and turned their faces, stoically, towards April. It had been a season of grief and mourning.

The overnight pitch was a brief one. They rose early. Fires were re-lit from the still-warm embers of the previous night. The women brewed gallons of strong sweet tea, and fried the last of the bread in the fat that remained from the supper-bacon. They would not eat again until late in the evening.

The men attended to the horses and livestock, and then faced-to around the fire while they ate and made plans. They were anxious to move on while the fine weather lasted. There were steep hills to be climbed in the Blackdowns, and profitable hawking to be done by the women in villages along the road.

All was made fast before moving. The thin old plates and cups were packed carefully away; the sooty kettles and pans were placed inside the pan-box underneath the waggon. Bender tents were dismantled and loaded onto flat-carts. The steps that led up to the waggons were unfastened and suspended from hooks beneath the food cupboard. Horses were fetched, put between the shafts, and harnessed. The fires were doused, and a patteran of twigs and grasses was left for the instruction and guidance of any Rom who might follow on behind them.



The Loveridge waggon was a fine bow-top, with the frame built of ash wood and the bow made of stretched green canvas. The door and frame were decorated with painted scrolls of red and yellow, and the carved heads of dogs and horses. It had been purchased from the proceeds of horse-dealing and many hours of fiddle-playing by Jesse and his sons, in taverns and at village weddings.

Preparations for this journey westwards had been under way for many days. Jesse Loveridge had repainted his waggon, and his sons had greased the axles and had the horses specially shod. Meri and her mother had washed and boiled the family's linen, and hung it to dry and bleach in the April sunshine.

This journey to the Blackdowns was not only for the summer work of haytime and harvest, there was always a great coming-together of travellers in the spring of the year. Councils were held, and any bad conduct was looked into.

Marriages were arranged; and Meridiana Loveridge had been footloose for too long.

She was her family's jewel. Among the assets of the Loveridge tribe she ranked above the horses and the donkeys. In a family of tall women she was already, at the age of seventeen, taller than her mother. Meridiana was straight-backed, dark as any Egyptian. With a compelling gaze, and a head swathed in thick black braids, she drew every male eye in the western counties.



The morning road was sweet with promise. Meri wore her best Scotch plaid and starched white pinna'; red, blue and yellow ribbons were plaited in her hair and flying loose about her head and shoulders. She walked alone behind her father's waggon. She believed in signs and portents, in the power of the mind to transmit a desire and seed it in the mind of another. For Meri to want was to have. The distance between all and nothing had never existed for her. In Montacute there lived a gorgio who was the beauty of all the western counties, and she would have him.

They had not yet spoken together. She had called at his mother's door at fortuitous times, when he was returning from the quarry, or at work in his strip of garden. In one stolen corner, away from the precious cabbages and potatoes, he cosseted a single rose bush. Last June she had seen him rewarded with blooms of scented damask.

They came into Montacute in mid-morning. The houses lay golden and silent in the sunshine; the smell of wall-flowers was thick on the air. A few ducks swam about on a pond; a boy with a stick stood sentry on them while the gypsy waggons passed by. The men of the village were at work in field and quarry; the women and children, heads bent to the glove-making, were prisoners within their houses.

Meri knocked at the door of Number One, Wash Lane. She smiled and cajoled, although she did not need to. This woman was afraid of gypsies. The sale here was easy and without satisfaction. Meri lingered on the doorstep, she rubbed one bare foot across the other, and shifted the basket to her other arm. Mrs Carew looked apprehensive but determined.

'I shudden hang about yer, if I was you,' she told Meri, 'our Luke's gone away to work. He idden livin' yer no more.'

The road up to Buckland St Mary was long and steep, and without joy. Together with her cousins and mother, she hawked posies of wild flowers and clothes-pegs in Ilminster and Chard. It hardly mattered now if housewives bought from her or refused. The thought of Luke Carew twisted and bored into her mind until her head ached.



Eliza Greypaull watched the gypsies' ascent of Buckland Hill, always a dangerous business with the sweating horses pulling on the heavy waggons. She saw how two families worked together; how the horse of one was taken from its harness, and placed in traces in front of another. When the top of the hill was reached, both horses were walked back down to fetch up the second waggon. She had heard the gypsy-men call this practice 'doubling-up'.

Meri Loveridge was considerate of the family horses. Eliza saw her walking behind her father's bow-top carrying a chunk of wood mounted on a stick. At intervals during the long ascent she blocked the wheels for several minutes, allowing the horses to rest.

The bright April day had closed down in drizzle, and Eliza's petticoats and dress were soaked through and clinging around her ankles. The lane into Dommett Wood was green and dim, narrowed in its beginnings by hedges of

untrimmed blackthorn which grew inwards and shut out the daylight. Further in, the pathway widened into a clearing; a secretive shuttered place edged with holly and beech trees, and still slippery with the leaves of previous autumns.

The waggons swayed and creaked into the lane. It was a forbidden thoroughfare for gorgios; Buckland people rarely walked there. Stories were told of evil things seen and heard in the clearing. The farmer whose land nudged up to the lane had hung a high gate in between the blackthorns to prevent his cattle straying. Over the years, the gate had also, by association, acquired its own superstitious legend. No one ever leaned or swung upon it.

The lane drew Eliza. She moved as close to her father's gate as she could, without actually touching it. She lifted the fleecy shawl from her shoulders and covered her head. As she began to move away towards home, she could see Meri Loveridge running fast through the trees towards her.

They met as if it were only yesterday that they had last spoken together. They stood one on either side of the blackthorns and whispered urgently across the thicket.

'You'm not wedded then?'

Eliza covered one freckled hand defensively with the other. 'Next month. On the first day of May. To my cousin Philip.'

Meri frowned. 'May weddin's is unlucky. I could make 'ee a charm against marriage troubles, we could chop for that shawl you'm wearin'.'

'All right then. But don't wear it round the village, will 'ee, Meri? My mother's bound to recognise it.'

'You'm still feared o' your mother?'

'Aren't you?'

'I's seventeen. I do's what I wants to.'

Eliza knew that Meri told lies, that she was without shame, a brand to be plucked from the burning. The