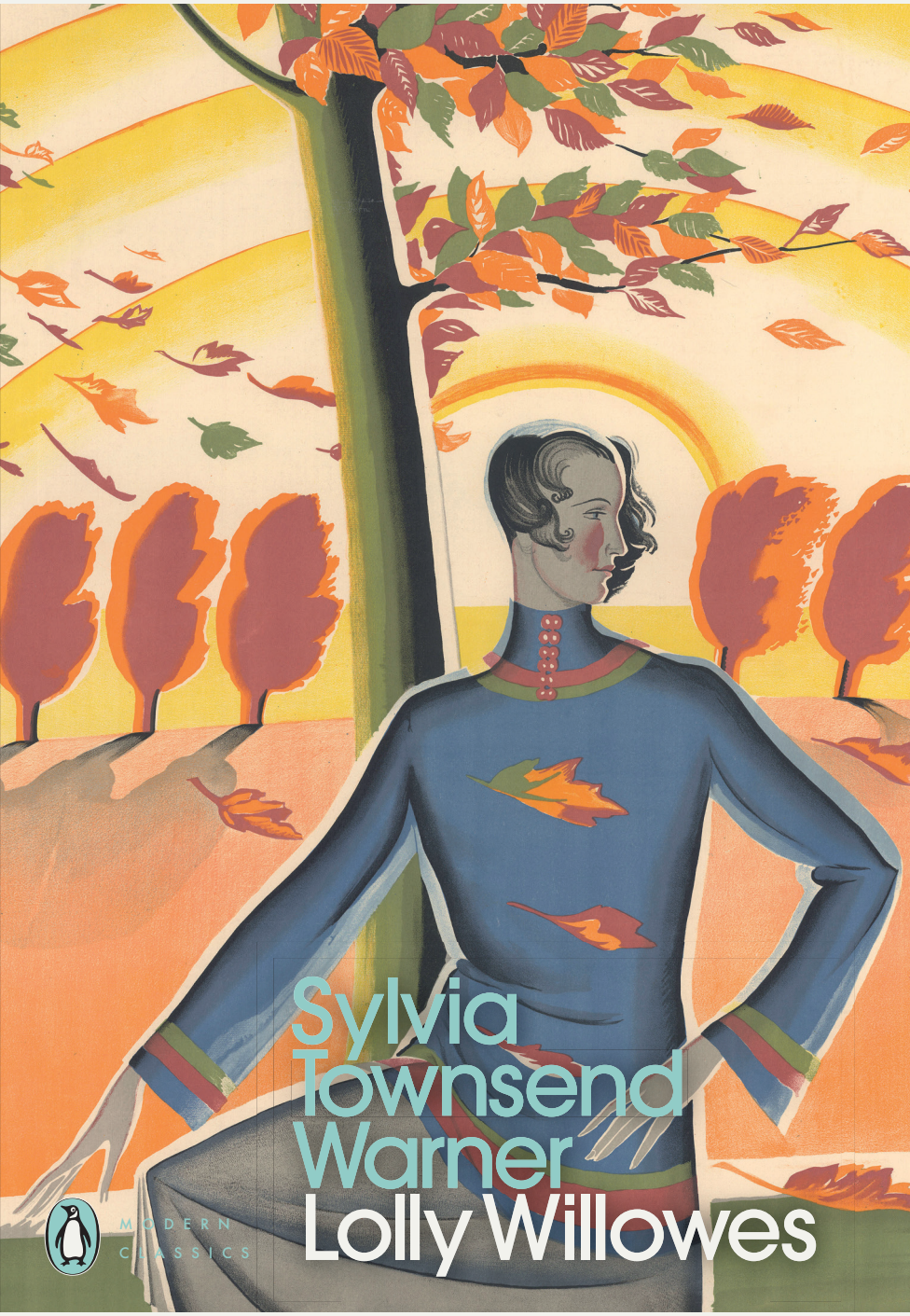

Sylvia
Townsend
Warner
Lolly Willowes
MODERN
CLASSICS

Lolly Willowes

Sylvia Townsend Warner was born in Harrow on the Hill in 1893. A home-schooled only child, she was musically gifted and initially planned to study composition in Vienna, but on the outbreak of the First World War she instead moved to London and worked in a munitions factory. After the war, she embarked on a career as a musicologist, specializing in Tudor church music. Through her work she met the much older musician Percy Buck, with whom she had a secret relationship for seventeen years. She began writing poetry in the early 1920s, and her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, appeared in 1926. It was a great success, though she herself was dismayed that readers failed to see beyond the novel's surface: 'I felt as though I had tried to make a sword, only to be told what a pretty pattern there was on the blade', she wrote to a friend. In 1930 she moved to a village in Dorset, where she fell in love with the poet Valentine Ackland, who would become her lifelong partner. Ardently left-wing, the two women became active in the Communist Party, and in 1936 they travelled to Barcelona to work for the Red Cross during the Spanish Civil War. They spent most of the rest of their lives settled in a house on the river at Frome Vauchurch in Dorset.

Warner's subsequent novels, written from the 1920s to 1950s, include *Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner That Held Them* and *The Flint Anchor*. She also wrote poetry, biography, short stories and anti-fascist articles, and translated Proust's essays. She died at home in Dorset in 1978.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner in Penguin Modern Classics

Lolly Willowes
Mr Fortune's Maggot
The True Heart
Summer Will Show
After the Death of Don Juan
The Corner That Held Them
The Flint Anchor

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SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

Lolly Willowes

or The Loving Huntsman



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Penguin
Random House
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First published by Chatto & Windus 1926
This edition published in Penguin Books 2020
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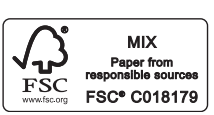
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Set in 11.25/14 pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–45488–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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to Bea Isabel Howe

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PART I

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When her father died, Laura Willowes went to live in London with her elder brother and his family.

'Of course,' said Caroline, 'you will come to us.'

'But it will upset all your plans. It will give you so much trouble. Are you sure you really want me?'

'Oh *dear*, yes.'

Caroline spoke affectionately, but her thoughts were elsewhere. They had already journeyed back to London to buy an eiderdown for the bed in the small spare-room. If the washstand were moved towards the door, would it be possible to fit in a writing-table between it and the fireplace? Perhaps a bureau would be better, because of the extra drawers? Yes, that was it. Lolly could bring the little walnut bureau with the false handles on one side and the top that jumped up when you touched the spring by the ink-well. It had belonged to Lolly's mother, and Lolly had always used it, so Sibyl could not raise any objections. Sibyl had no claim to it whatever, really. She had only been married to James for two years, and if the bureau had marked the morning-room wall-paper, she could easily put something else in its place. A stand with ferns and potted plants would look very nice.

Lolly was a gentle creature, and the little girls loved her; she would soon fit into her new home. The small spare-room would be rather a loss. They could not give up the large spare-room to

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Lolly, and the small spare-room was the handiest of the two for ordinary visitors. It seemed extravagant to wash a pair of the large linen sheets for a single guest who came but for a couple of nights. Still, there it was, and Henry was right – Lolly ought to come to them. London would be a pleasant change for her. She would meet nice people, and in London she would have a better chance of marrying. Lolly was twenty-eight. She would have to make haste if she were going to find a husband before she was thirty. Poor Lolly! black was not becoming to her. She looked sallow, and her pale grey eyes were paler and more surprising than ever underneath that very unbecoming black mushroom hat. Mourning was never satisfactory if one bought it in a country town.

While these thoughts passed through Caroline's mind, Laura was not thinking at all. She had picked a red geranium flower, and was staining her left wrist with the juice of its crushed petals. So, when she was younger, she had stained her pale cheeks, and had bent over the greenhouse tank to see what she looked like. But the greenhouse tank showed only a dark shadowy Laura, very dark and smooth like the lady in the old holy painting that hung in the dining-room and was called the Leonardo.

'The girls will be delighted,' said Caroline. Laura roused herself. It was all settled, then, and she was going to live in London with Henry, and Caroline his wife, and Fancy and Marion his daughters. She would become an inmate of the tall house in Apsley Terrace where hitherto she had only been a country sister-in-law on a visit. She would recognise a special something in the physiognomy of that house-front which would enable her to stop certainly before it without glancing at the number or the door-knocker. Within it, she would know unhesitatingly which of the polished brown doors was which, and become quite indifferent to the position of the cistern, which had baffled her so one night when she lay awake trying to assemble the house inside

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the box of its outer walls. She would take the air in Hyde Park and watch the children on their ponies and the fashionable trim ladies in Rotten Row, and go to the theatre in a cab.

London life was very full and exciting. There were the shops, processions of the Royal Family and of the unemployed, the gold tunnel at Whiteley's, and the brilliance of the streets by night. She thought of the street lamps, so impartial, so imperturbable in their stately diminuendos, and felt herself abashed before their scrutiny. Each in turn would hand her on, her and her shadow, as she walked the unfathomed streets and squares – but they would be familiar then – complying with the sealed orders of the future; and presently she would be taking them for granted, as the Londoners do. But in London there would be no greenhouse with a glossy tank, and no apple-room, and no potting-shed, earthy and warm, with bunches of poppy heads hanging from the ceiling, and sunflower seeds in a wooden box, and bulbs in thick paper bags, and hanks of tarred string, and lavender drying on a tea-tray. She must leave all this behind, or only enjoy it as a visitor, unless James and Sibyl happened to feel, as Henry and Caroline did, that of course she must live with them.

Sibyl said: 'Dearest Lolly! So Henry and Caroline are to have you . . . We shall miss you more than I can say, but of course you will prefer London. Dear old London with its picturesque fogs and its interesting people, and all. I quite envy you. But you mustn't quite forsake Lady Place. You must come and pay us long visits, so that Tito doesn't forget his aunt.'

'Will you miss me, Tito?' said Laura, and stooped down to lay her face against his prickly bib and his smooth, warm head. Tito fastened his hands round her finger.

'I'm sure he'll miss your ring, Lolly,' said Sibyl. 'You'll have to cut the rest of your teeth on the poor old coral when Auntie Lolly goes, won't you, my angel?'

'I'll give him the ring if you think he'll really miss it, Sibyl.'

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Sibyl's eyes glowed; but she said:

'Oh no, Lolly, I couldn't think of taking it. Why, it's a family ring.'

When Fancy Willowes had grown up, and married, and lost her husband in the war, and driven a lorry for the Government, and married again from patriotic motives, she said to Owen Wolf-Saunders, her second husband:

'How unenterprising women were in the old days! Look at Aunt Lolly. Grandfather left her five hundred a year, and she was nearly thirty when he died, and yet she could find nothing better to do than to settle down with Mum and Dad, and stay there ever since.'

'The position of single women was very different twenty years ago,' answered Mr Wolf-Saunders. '*Feme sole*, you know, and *feme couverte*, and all that sort of rot.'

Even in 1902 there were some forward spirits who wondered why that Miss Willowes, who was quite well off, and not likely to marry, did not make a home for herself and take up something artistic or emancipated. Such possibilities did not occur to any of Laura's relations. Her father being dead, they took it for granted that she should be absorbed into the household of one brother or the other. And Laura, feeling rather as if she were a piece of family property forgotten in the will, was ready to be disposed of as they should think best.

The point of view was old-fashioned, but the Willoweses were a conservative family and kept to old-fashioned ways. Preference, not prejudice, made them faithful to their past. They slept in beds and sat upon chairs whose comfort insensibly persuaded them into respect for the good sense of their forbears. Finding that well-chosen wood and well-chosen wine improved with keeping, they believed that the same law applied to well-chosen ways. Moderation, civil speaking, leisure of the mind and a

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handsome simplicity were canons of behaviour imposed upon them by the example of their ancestors.

Observing those canons, no member of the Willowes family had risen to much eminence. Perhaps great-great-aunt Salome had made the nearest approach to fame. It was a decent family boast that great-great-aunt Salome's puff-paste had been commended by King George III. And great-great-aunt Salome's prayer-book, with the services for King Charles the Martyr and the Restoration of the Royal Family and the welfare of the House of Hanover – a nice example of impartial piety – was always used by the wife of the head of the family. Salome, though married to a Canon of Salisbury, had taken off her embroidered kid gloves, turned up her sleeves, and gone into the kitchen to mix the paste for His Majesty's eating, her Venice-point lappets dangling above the floury bowl. She was a loyal subject, a devout churchwoman, and a good housewife, and the Willoweses were properly proud of her. Titus, her father, had made a voyage to the Indies, and had brought back with him a green parrokeet, the first of its kind to be seen in Dorset. The parrokeet was named Ratafee, and lived for fifteen years. When he died he was stuffed; and perched as in life upon his ring, he swung from the cornice of the china-cupboard surveying four generations of the Willowes family with his glass eyes. Early in the nineteenth century one eye fell out and was lost. The eye which replaced it was larger, but inferior both in lustre and expressiveness. This gave Ratafee a rather leering look, but it did not compromise the esteem in which he was held. In a humble way the bird had made county history, and the family acknowledged it, and gave him a niche in their own.

Beside the china-cupboard and beneath Ratafee stood Emma's harp, a green harp ornamented with gilt scrolls and acanthus leaves in the David manner. When Laura was little she would sometimes steal into the empty drawing-room and pluck the

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strings which remained unbroken. They answered with a melancholy and distracted voice, and Laura would pleasantly frighten herself with the thought of Emma's ghost coming back to make music with cold fingers, stealing into the empty drawing-room as noiselessly as she had done. But Emma's was a gentle ghost. Emma had died of a decline, and when she lay dead with a bunch of snowdrops under her folded palms a lock of her hair was cut off to be embroidered into a picture of a willow tree exhaling its branches above a padded white satin tomb. 'That,' said Laura's mother, 'is an heirloom of your great-aunt Emma who died.' And Laura was sorry for the poor young lady who alone, it seemed to her, of all her relations had had the misfortune to die.

Henry, born in 1818, grandfather to Laura and nephew to Emma, became head of the house of Willowes when he was but twenty-four, his father and unmarried elder brother dying of smallpox within a fortnight of each other. As a young man Henry had shown a roving and untraditional temperament, so it was fortunate that he had the licence of a cadet to go his own way. He had taken advantage of this freedom to marry a Welsh lady, and to settle near Yeovil, where his father bought him a partnership in a brewery. It was natural to expect that upon becoming the head of the family Henry would abandon, if not the Welsh wife and the brewery, at least Somerset, and return to his native place. But this he would not do. He had become attached to the neighbourhood where he had spent the first years of his married life; the ill-considered jest of his uncle the Admiral, that Henry was courting a Welshwoman with a tall hat like Mother Shipton's who would carry her shoes to church, had secretly estranged him from his relations; and – most weighty reason of all – Lady Place, a small solid mansion, which he had long coveted – saying to himself that if ever he were rich enough he would make his wife the mistress of it – just then

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came into the market. The Willowes obstinacy, which had for so long kept unchanged the home in Dorset, was now to transfer that home across the county border. The old house was sold, and the furniture and family belongings were installed at Lady Place. Several strings of Emma's harp were broken, some feathers were jolted out of Ratafee's tail, and Mrs Willowes, whose upbringing had been Evangelical, was distressed for several Sundays by the goings-on that she found in Salome's prayer-book. But in the main the Willowes tradition stood the move very well. The tables and chairs and cabinets stood in the same relation to each other as before; the pictures hung in the same order though on new walls; and the Dorset hills were still to be seen from the windows, though now from windows facing south instead of from windows facing north. Even the brewery, untraditional as it was, soon weathered and became indistinguishably part of the Willowes way of life.

Henry Willowes had three sons and four daughters. Everard, the eldest son, married his second cousin, Miss Frances D'Urfey. She brought some more Willowes property to the Somerset house: a set of garnets; a buff and gold tea-service bequeathed her by the Admiral, an amateur of china, who had dowered all his nieces and great-nieces with Worcester, Minton, and Oriental; and two oil-paintings by Italian masters which the younger Titus, Emma's brother, had bought in Rome whilst travelling for his health. She bore Everard three children: Henry, born in 1867; James, born in 1869; and Laura, born in 1874.

On Henry's birth Everard laid down twelve dozen of port against his coming of age. Everard was proud of the brewery, and declared that beer was the befitting drink for all classes of Englishmen, to be preferred over foreign wines. But he did not extend this ban to port and sherry; it was clarets he particularly despised.

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Another twelve dozen of port was laid down for James, and there it seemed likely the matter would end.

Everard was a lover of womankind; he greatly desired a daughter, and when he got one she was all the dearer for coming when he had almost given up hope of her. His delight upon this occasion, however, could not be so compactly expressed. He could not lay down port for Laura. At last he hit upon the solution of his difficulty. Going up to London upon the mysterious and inadequate pretext of growing bald, he returned with a little string of pearls, small and evenly matched, which exactly fitted the baby's neck. Year by year, he explained, the necklace could be extended until it encircled the neck of a grown-up young woman at her first ball. The ball, he went on to say, must take place in winter, for he wished to see Laura trimmed with ermine. 'My dear,' said Mrs Willowes, 'the poor girl will look like a Beefeater.' But Everard was not to be put off. A stuffed ermine which he had known as a boy was still his ideal of the enchanted princess, so pure and sleek was it, and so artfully poised the small neat head on the long throat. 'Weasel!' exclaimed his wife. 'Everard, how dare you love a minx?'

Laura escaped the usual lot of the new-born, for she was not at all red. To Everard she seemed his very ermine come to true life. He was in love with her femininity from the moment he set eyes on her. 'Oh, the fine little lady!' he cried out when she was first shown to him, wrapped in shawls, and whimpering at the keen sunlight of a frosty December morning. Three days after that it thawed, and Mr Willowes rode to hounds. But he came back after the first kill. ' 'Twas a vixen,' he said. 'Such a pretty young vixen. It put me in mind of my own, and I thought I'd ride back to see how she was behaving. Here's the brush.'

Laura grew up almost as an only child. By the time she was past her babyhood her brothers had gone to school. When they came back for their holidays, Mrs Willowes would say: 'Now,

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