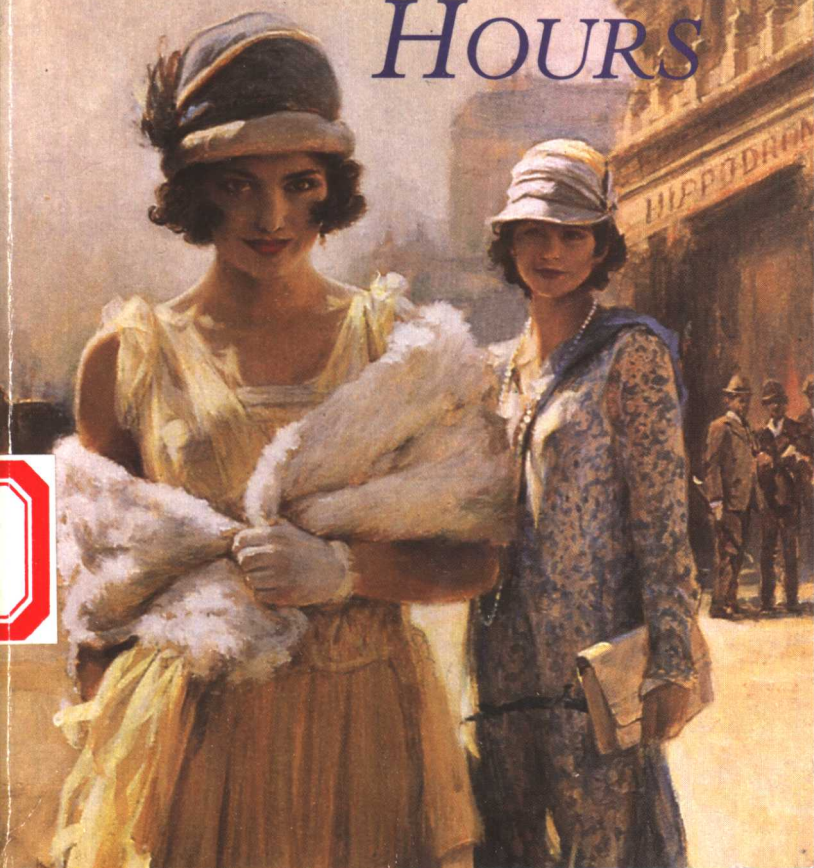


MARINA OLIVER

THE GLOWING HOURS





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PAN BOOKS



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On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing Hours with flying feet . . .

Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III

Chapter One

'AIN'T none on yer comin'?"

Nell, poised astride the narrow windowsill, stuffed her ragged petticoat into the red flannel bloomers. She looked over her shoulder. Nine pairs of eyes, some envious, most apprehensive, stared back at her. How defeated they looked, she thought with a spurt of irritation. They were so passive, so unwilling to fight. Little red-haired Amy was the only one ever to show a scrap of spirit, and she'd soon have it beaten out of her. Then she was ashamed of her scorn. They hadn't had any chance to experience a different sort of life. How could they know it was possible to live without endless anger and violence? She was the eldest of the girls, and had only recently summoned up the courage to rebel.

No one spoke, and with a shrug she grasped the rope made from a rough, almost threadbare blanket, tied to the brass bedstead, and swung her leg out. 'Yer'll rue it,' she warned, then hissed, 'Shut winder, mind, Danny,' as she slid partway down the rope. The frighteningly familiar thumps and bangs from the room beneath ceased, and heavy footsteps could be heard staggering up the narrow, twisting stairs.

She made sure her treasured old patch-box of blue Wednesday enamelling was safe in the belt she had fashioned for it. It was the only item in the house which was truly her own, and she hid it jealously from everyone else. No one would take this

away from her. It was her talisman, her good-luck symbol. Then she dropped the last few feet on to the cobbles of the yard. Keeping in the shadows cast by the small houses, Nell ran swiftly towards the alley and freedom. In the dark entry she untied the shabby black skirt she'd slung round her neck, grinning at the picture she must present. She'd been in too much of a hurry to dress fully, just grabbing the skirt and a shawl that was more holes than substance, and for easier movement draping them round her.

Eth had protested when she dragged the shawl from on top of the blankets. 'That's ours, an' we'll be cold,' she whined nasally.

'You've still got a blanket,' Nell retorted. 'I'll be out in cold all night. Sides, there's three on yer to keep each other warm in bed.'

She shivered, more with anger than cold, as she struggled into the skirt. She couldn't endure Pa's constant beatings, she thought, tucking in the blouse, which was too small for her now her breasts were full and round, but was the only one she possessed. Finding somewhere else to sleep on the nights he was drunk and belligerent was all she could do. She bent to fasten her boots properly. At least her feet hadn't grown, and the boots her gran had bought her three years ago when she was thirteen still fitted, or she'd be barefoot like the rest.

Wrapping the shawl round her head, she went out into the street. To her left was the pub on the corner of Ryland Street. Half a dozen barefooted children, dressed in miserable apologies of rags, clustered near the door. Old Billy Bickley, who'd lost his legs at Gallipoli in 1916 eight years earlier, was sitting on his makeshift trolley nearby, playing his fiddle, collecting the few coppers folk could spare.

Nell could hear men carousing inside. They were the fortunate ones, with jobs to do and pennies in their pockets. Beneath the gas lamp on the corner Janie and Katie Pritchard waited hopefully, dressed in torn, seedy finery, the gleam of filthy but still bright satin showing through the encrusted dirt. Nell glanced round. If they were working tonight their brother Wilfred

would be nearby, lurking in some alleyway, watching. Not to protect them, she knew, more to ensure they didn't escape his clutches and take their miserable earnings away with them. She turned the other way. Wilfred had tried more than once to entice her into his net with promises of untold wealth and a luxurious life.

'You don't mek enough ter get out o' Ladywood, even,' she'd said scornfully.

He grinned, revealing his blackened teeth and spat out a gobber of phlegm.

'Thass 'cos Oi'm saving it 'til Oi can goo ter posh plice loike 'Andsworth, 'ave a dacent 'ouse, proper accommodation fer blokes wor cum,' he explained ingratiatingly. 'A pretty little wench loike yow, wi' them slanty green eyes an' curves wor mek a fella' look twice, 'ud be a proper draw. Yow could foind yersen a rich 'un, mek 'im wed yer, p'raps,' he'd added, his sneering disbelief undisguised.

Nell shuddered at the recollection. She'd been safe then, for he'd spoken to her near the main Ladywood Road, and she knew she could outrun him. She had long, supple legs: he was grossly fat and unhealthy. She was well aware that if he caught her in some dark corner she would have no chance of getting away, and no one would interfere in her defence.

There was a full moon, and though September it was still warm. She had a sudden urge to explore further. Instead of huddling down on the stairs leading to the crypt in St John's churchyard, or finding shelter in a garden shed behind one of the big villas in streets at the better end of Ladywood Road, she'd try Monument Road.

It seemed a long way down the narrow streets and alleys. It was light enough to see clearly, and she wandered past some really big houses. But they were not so enormous as the ones to the south of the Hagley Road, which would have stables. At the sudden thought she hugged her shawl closer. Dare she attempt it? Before he died Gramps had been a coachman, and she had no fear of horses. If she could find a snug corner near the animals,

with the steamy heat they produced, she'd have a comfortable refuge even in the depths of winter. If not, life would be even grimmer.

She went past Perrott's Folly, over the Hagley Road, and soon reached a street of houses with carriage drives and side entrances. She'd only been here once before. The first few older houses had small front gardens, but no sign of occupied stables. Nell turned a corner and came to the mansions she sought, big Victorian villas set in their own secluded gardens. Sidling along in the shelter of low sandstone walls which restrained rampant clumps of laurel and rhododendron bushes, pausing to draw in deep, refreshing breaths of the clean, pungent aroma, Nell explored. She found one stable in which could be heard the snufflings of a horse. Her hopes soared, but the door was firmly locked and there was no way in. There were coach houses where she could have been comfortable, and Nell took careful note of where these were. In one there were even cushions left in a pile, which would have made a luxurious bed. A couple of former coach houses were occupied by motor cars, and she could have slept in one of these, warm and secure. But Nell had set her heart on finding a refuge where the warmth and companionship of a horse or pony could be had.

At last she found a stable which was occupied and unlocked. There was just an iron bar hooked across the doorway. Nell retreated into a concealing laurel bush while she considered the situation. As long as she could pull the door closed from inside, and replace the bar in the morning before anyone came, she would be safe. From the subdued noises, the clink of hooves against cobbles, a cough and a wheeze, she thought there might be two occupants. The moon shone directly on the door, and she glanced round cautiously. A thick, high hedge protected her from the house and no one there could see her. There was no room above the stable where a coachman might sleep.

She pushed back the long dark plaits which hung to her waist. She hadn't had time to bundle them up as she usually did. Then she took a deep breath and moved forward. As quietly as

possible she lifted the heavy bar out of the bracket and lowered it, then carefully swung open the door. It gave a protesting squeak and Nell, nervous, whisked inside the opening and dragged the door to behind her. To her immense relief her scrabbling fingers found a loop of string attached to the wall and a hook on the inside of the door. Once this was secured she stood quietly to let her eyes become accustomed to the dimness, as diffuse moonlight streamed in through a small, rather dirty window.

There were two loose boxes, in which two equine heads were turned curiously towards her. At one end of the small passageway harness hung neatly on hooks, under a range of shelves holding brushes and curry combs, metal polish and liniments. At the other end, the best find of all, was a heap of loose hay. Several horse blankets were folded on a shelf above.

Nell breathed a sigh of relief. Tentatively she stroked the noses of the horses, fed them each a wisp of hay, and took down two blankets. She spread one out on the soft pile, and wrapped the other round her. With a sigh of pure contentment she sank down into a nest more warm and snug than any bed she'd ever known, and for a fleeting moment wished she might live here for ever.

Then the dream was shattered. The door was pulled open as far as it would go. Moonlight gleamed on a knife being used to hack away at the loop of string, and before Nell could disentangle herself from the enveloping horse blankets the string gave way. The door was flung wide open, and she was blinded by the ray of a lantern.

'Yes, madam, to be sure. It can be ready for you by tomorrow. Naturally, madam. At your service. Shall we send it to madam?'

Gwyneth spoke quietly, holding on to her volatile temper with difficulty. What she would give to be able, just once, to treat the customers with the disdain many of them showed her.

'Of course, girl. And this time it had better be exactly right.'

'Haughty piecel She wants it shortened again, she does, and

by less than half an inch!' Gwyneth muttered beneath her breath to her fellow assistant, her vivid blue eyes glaring after the departing customer.

'Shut up! She's watching you!' Lizzie hissed back.

Gwyneth hastily dropped her eyes as Miss Fremling, the manageress of the gown shop, stalked across the floor to her. 'Miss Davis, your hair is appallingly untidy again. Go and comb it, but don't take all afternoon.'

'She'd like to dismiss me if she could,' Gwyneth complained bitterly, walking along New Street with Lizzie at the end of the day. 'I can't help having curly hair! Why does she have to pick on me so much? If I put a step wrong I'd be finished.'

'She wanted the job for her niece,' Lizzie said consolingly. 'I know you're never rude, but when you're annoyed you do sound a bit sarcastic, and your Welsh accent gets a lot stronger. One day she'll try and use that against you.'

'My accent?' Gwyneth gave an astonished laugh. 'She could dismiss me just because of my accent?'

'I've heard her complaining to Miss Sanders that sometimes it's difficult to understand what you say. She might say the customers can't understand, and that would give her a chance to get rid of you.'

'I see.' Gwyneth was thoughtful. 'I hadn't realized it was so - foreign! I thought I spoke more like my mother than my father.'

'Where does she come from?'

'Shropshire, near Ludlow. And she always insisted we had English nannies. But I had to go to school in Saundersfoot. There wasn't any money to send me away to an English school as well as my brothers. I suppose I'm lucky they didn't all speak Welsh there!'

'Don't risk being dismissed! It's been so much more fun since you came to work at the shop,' Lizzie said urgently.

'I won't risk it on purpose,' Gwyneth said fervently. 'I was so very lucky to get the job without any references, and I couldn't hope to be so fortunate again. I'd have to go and work

in a factory if I lost this job, and somehow I don't think I'd like that.'

'You wouldn't. It's terribly hard work, they say. Are we going to a dance tomorrow? The Palais or the Tower?'

'The Tower's too big.' She giggled. 'You may never see your partner again if he goes away.'

Lizzie shook her head. 'They'd come looking for you,' she maintained with certainty. 'You're so pretty with your curly hair and big blue eyes and you're always smiling.'

'You don't mention my ruddy complexion and fat cheeks that make me look like a milkmaid,' Gwyneth grimaced, laughing. 'Or that I'm too tall for most men to feel comfortable dancing with me!'

'I hadn't noticed them keeping away because of that! We can change at work and go straight there. Have you finished your new dress?'

'Just the hem to do.'

'That's the third in a month! I'm saving up for another. I saw some lovely material in the rag market, and there are some feathers Miss Fremling threw out. They were broken, but I can sew them on so that it won't show. Quick! There's our tram!'

Lizzie lived further out from Birmingham city centre, near Warley Park and well past Five Ways, but Gwyneth had found a room just off Islington Row. She'd planned to walk to and from work, but after a long twelve-hour day standing in the shop she'd found she was exhausted. It was too easy to catch the tram with Lizzie, which on its outward journey went right along Islington Row. A month later, now she was more used to it, she could have managed, but she enjoyed Lizzie's company and the gossip they were forbidden at work. It was worth the penny fare. Lizzie wasn't really a friend, but she was company, and it was lonelier than she'd anticipated, leaving home.

And she had only herself to spend her meagre wages on, she thought guiltily. Lizzie had to give all hers to her mother, and was allowed only a couple of shillings a week to spend on herself. She

had to save hard for a new dress, for she spent half her money on entrance tickets to dances every Saturday.

Perhaps she ought to send some money home to her mother. Then Gwyneth hardened her heart. No, much as she loved her mother she dared not contact her, give any clue as to her whereabouts, or her father would be storming back into her life. That was the last thing she wanted. If getting away from her stern, bigoted father meant she lost her mother too, that price had to be paid. Besides, she'd left home so that she could dance, and to dance she needed the right dresses.

One day, perhaps, she'd write to her mother. Not yet, though. Her freedom was too new and precious to risk. As she entered the doorway of the tall house where her room, right under the eaves, provided a haven, she was humming below her breath the latest tunes she'd heard at last week's dance.

'What was that fearful commotion last night, Andrew darling?'

Kitty Denver smoothed down her dark bobbed hair, looked longingly at the heaped plate of bacon and sausages, kidneys and eggs in front of her companion, and began to nibble as slowly as possible at an almost transparent slice of bread thinly spread with butter.

Andrew chewed hungrily, looking intently across the table. 'What colour is your hair, precisely?' he asked instead.

Kitty laughed. 'Heavens, how should I know?' she said airily. 'Dark brown? But why this sudden interest in my hair?'

He shook his head, and hastily finished another mouthful. 'In some lights it looks red. Yet in others it seems quite black.'

'Dark brown. That covers every variation, unless you're going to say I'm striped or pied. And my eyes are a funny sort of hazel, in case you want to discuss them too. Don't try and change the subject, sweetie-pie. What happened last night?'

'I went out for a cigarette. I was being good, dear coz, knowing how you feel about the smell -'

'Not me; Mama. She's fanatical, and even though she's on the

opposite side of the Atlantic, thank God, and long may she stay there, she'd hear about it from Meggy. And that would be the end of your free room and board here, my sweet. But surely you didn't make all that noise trying to light up?

He laughed. 'You must get old Betts to put a lock on the stable. Some wretched urchin had got in there and was bedding down for the night.'

Kitty's eyes grew round with excitement and Andrew suppressed a grin. She might pluck her eyebrows into a pencil-thin line, wear the latest fashions and try to appear blasé and sophisticated, but when she was in a pleasant mood she could be a good sort, still eager for fun.

'Did you catch him?' she asked. 'What did you do? How absolutely thrilling! Ought we to send for the police?'

'It wasn't a him. I was so startled to see a girl jump up from the hay I almost dropped the lantern.'

'A girl? Darling, what fun. But why did you have a lantern?'

'I'd fetched it and a knife when I realized someone was inside. I heard the door as she pulled it shut. She'd tied that loop of string round the hook, and luckily I could just get the knife through the crack and cut it.'

'What happened? Did she get away? Or are you being terribly wicked and depraved, and hiding her in your room? Didn't you do that at Oxford with some girl? I shall be jealous, darling.'

He laughed ruefully. 'No, that was Paul. I put the lantern down and went to grab her, but she bit my hand, the little devil! And there's no need to chortle like that!'

'You're six foot tall, broad, you played rugger at Harrow, you shot Germans in the army, and you let a child just bite your hand and escape? How simply divine! And you don't want me to laugh!'

'Damn it, she was older than I thought at first. She looked such a child, but when she ran away, I saw she was — er — taller than I'd expected. It startled me.'

'Taller?' Kitty queried mischievously. 'Surely you mean more

buxom? I am certainly jealous! Andrew, darling, you're actually blushing!

'Don't be a congenital idiot! Do you want more tea?' he asked curtly, going to the sideboard to replenish his plate.

'Stop being snappy! It's not like you. I don't want any more tea. And I do wish you'd eat less!' she added petulantly, her mood threatening to change. 'It's not fair, I eat hardly anything and I can't stay thin, while you eat like a pig and stay exactly the same as you've been for years.'

'You fuss too much. You're too skinny already. Meggy always says I need feeding up when I come here. And it's so much better than any other digs, I have to make up for the beastly food in them.'

'Andrew, darling, don't let's squabble. Tell me more about this girl. Which way did she go? Why the devil should she try to sleep in our stable? That was it, wasn't it? She wasn't trying to steal the horses?'

'She was wrapped up in one of the blankets; I had the impression she was settling down for the night. But she'd vanished completely by the time I picked up the lantern, not even the rustle of bushes to give her away.'

'What was she like?'

He shrugged. 'It's hard to say. She looked very pale, but that could have been the poor light. Dark hair, it gleamed like ebony, no lighter shades such as you have, thick ropes of it hanging down her back. A wide forehead, pointed chin, but I couldn't see many details, just the shape. Almost as tall as you, very thin, and clothes that were ragged and hardly big enough for her. And boots. I know she had boots because she kicked me on the shin, too.'

Kitty giggled. 'What a lark! That's something I wouldn't dare do! Did she say anything? Was she a local girl, or could she have been a gypsy?'

'I don't know. She didn't make a sound. But just in case she has any friends around, take care today. Get Betts to put on a lock. Aunt Cecily would be furious if she thought I wasn't

protecting you properly. That's the only reason she and Meggy encourage me to stay here.'

'Her suffragette notions don't extend that far! Men still have the task of protecting poor feeble women,' Kitty mocked. 'Not that you did very well against another slip of a girl,' she added.

He stood abruptly. 'I must go. Rehearsal at nine. And a matinée. Don't expect me back until late - I'll eat out.'

Kitty pouted. 'You're such a bore these days, obsessed with your wretched saxophone. It was bad enough when I was a child, visiting at Grandmama's, admiring my big cousin, and you used to kick me out so that you could practise, but you weren't so madly dedicated then!'

'I have to prove my professionalism,' Andrew said lightly. 'The family were offended enough when I made it clear I would go on the stage whatever they said, but some of the performers think I'm just a dilettante, so I have to prove them wrong too! Besides, I enjoy it, and what else is life for but to have fun and do what you want?'

'You may have fun but I certainly don't! Why, I hardly see you when you come here. Thank heavens darling Timothy is in Birmingham this weekend.'

Saturday was the day Mrs Baxter had the use of the wash house in the court. It was the least popular day, since everyone wanted to clean their own houses for the weekend. She had to take it because they were the last to come to live there. And she'd given up long ago any pretence that she could keep her home as well as her ma had done. Ma hadn't had sixteen kids. Nor had she been reduced to living in a back-to-back slum house with twelve children in just two small bedrooms, and all the water having to be fetched from a tap the far side of the court.

At first she'd tried hard, when they'd rented a through house in Walsall. Then her Albert lost the good job he'd had on the railways, and they'd moved several times, getting nearer to Dudley, with Albert taking less and less well-paid jobs, and the houses they could afford getting smaller and meaner. Two years

ago they'd landed here, in Ladywood. Albert found a job as a porter in one of the metal workshops, and so far, despite his drinking, he'd managed to keep it.

She bent to lay the kindling under the copper, and turned as Nell staggered into the wash house with two brimming buckets. She looked pale and tired, and Mrs Baxter wondered where she had spent the night.

'I've fed the kids, but young Ronny's howlin' again,' Nell said briefly, as her mother helped her lift the heavy buckets to tip the water into the copper. 'Shall I bring him out here?'

'I fed 'im less than an 'our since,' her mother said wearily. 'E don't 'ave the strength ter suck. But yer should be on yer way ter work, ducks,' she added. 'Yer mustn't be late.'

'I won't be, I can run, so I've time to help yer carry a couple more buckets in here, Ma. An' I'll help clear up this afternoon.'

'Yer's a good wench, Nell.'

When Nell had to go at last, fearful of being late to her job operating a press in the same factory where her father worked, Mrs Baxter stood, her youngest child clasped to her sagging breast, and looked after her wistfully. Saturday again. It was the worst day of the week, and not only because it was washday. It was backbreaking work, heaving the buckets of water about, thumping the dirt out of the washing with the dolly, then lifting it all out and rinsing and mangling, finally draining the water and tidying up. All the time she had to try not to make more holes and tears in the worn, shabby fabrics. She could cope with hard work, she'd been used to it all her life. But she dreaded Saturday most of all because it was the night Albert went to the pub.

He couldn't usually afford to go more than once a week, not since they'd moved here. On Saturdays he went regularly, and drank until he was convinced he was boxing champion of Birmingham. He'd been a fine figure of a man when she'd married him; now he was flabby and coarse. She'd come to dread the nights he went boozing. It was a blessing if he came to blows with a neighbour, or a mate down at the pub. Then he'd