

The Golden Hour

Jacque Bloese



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1

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PROLOGUE

Brighton, 1896

The body comes up with the spring tide, not far from where the gulls smash clams and winkles under the rusting girders of the pier. It lies blunted and bruised on the glistening pebbles as the sea retreats, and in those few moonlit hours before it rises again there is a peace of sorts: crabs scuttle from their whelk shells to feast and fight, a thorn ray lays a pouch of eggs in the green shallow waters, a kittiwake swoops silver across the shingle and calls out a blessing.

A fisherman down on the beach at the first shimmer of dawn with his young son sees it first, and he turns his boy's head away and tells him to go to school today instead. He is superstitious, he won't go out on the boat this morning, and then, just as he is deciding what to do, he sees the fellow who's made a mint from selling ice cream, out for his early morning stroll. They confer in hushed tones as the tide creeps in and more boatmen come, and someone covers the body with a blanket, and a boy is given a penny to fetch a policeman, but he spends it on a bun from Medfords and forgets; and by the time word is received at the station and the constable on duty has reached the seafront, the sun is up and so too is most of Brighton, and a small crowd has gathered, as crowds tend to do in this shoeless, well-heeled town.

Constable Fisher waits a moment before approaching. He's been in this job for long enough to know when there's

Jacquie Bloese

been foul play – it's there if you look in the set of a person's shoulders, the shifting dart of an eye. It's in the air too, you can smell wrongdoing, just as you can goodness: he's a religious man and he believes in spirits. Heads turn as he walks down the slipway; but he can't yet see the body. It's a woman, he expects. It's almost always a woman.

Chapter One

One year earlier

The band is mid-way through ‘The Sailor’s Hornpipe’ when Ellen Harper first sees the girl. She is sitting alone on a bench, under the shelters, a half-eaten penny ice in one hand, the other pressed to her forehead, in the manner of an old maid who cannot bear the Sunday afternoon rumpus on the pier and is somewhat regretting the tuppence she paid. But the girl is no old maid. Ellen sees this and so does a young man, clean-shaven in a Homburg hat, who stops uninvited, casting her in shadow and saying something that causes the girl to redden. She looks about her, skittish as a new foal; he lays a hand on her arm and she shrinks back – and this last gesture, the audacity of it, is all it takes. Ellen Harper’s feet are ahead of her mind, her boots click-clacking across the wooden boards, the surge of the sea beneath her, and applause for the hornpipe in her wake.

The man eyes her warily. Not brazen enough to brazen it out; a coward in his scuffed boots and cheap waistcoat with its gilt watch chain. He must sense the anger in her, for he mumbles good afternoon and slopes off into the crowd.

‘I hope I wasn’t interrupting.’

The girl looks up. A face like a heart and clear grey eyes that seem to incline more towards melancholy than merriment. Young – seventeen at a guess – with an older person’s weariness about her. A straw hat, bent a little out of shape as

Jacquie Bloese

if some younger sibling has jumped upon it, a stain or two on her gloves, a pale blue skirt with the colour leached from the hem through laundering. Although clean, her attire borders on shabby; too shabby to be in service in one of the squares, she is perhaps – and now Ellen is hopeful for her – in apprentice as a seamstress, somewhere that over time will pay enough for a hat with trimmings, and lace gloves in the summer.

‘No, miss. I didn’t know him – nor wanted to neither,’ she adds, as much to herself as to Ellen, and she takes a spoonful of the melted chocolate ice, and stares towards the silver horizon, just as the Newhaven steamer passes, with its muffled moan.

‘I’d like to go where that one’s going.’ The girl speaks softly, with the air of someone unused to attention.

‘France, you mean?’

She looks at Ellen with interest. ‘Is that where it’s off to?’

‘It’s the three o’clock from Newhaven, I expect.’ Ellen finds herself sitting then, a handspan away from the girl. ‘It’ll be in Dieppe by teatime.’

‘Dieppe,’ her companion repeats tentatively, as if she has just been served up snails on a plate. And then for Ellen, the smallest of smiles. ‘Have you been there, miss?’

‘In passing. Only at night though.’ Ellen laughs for no obvious reason, and tells herself she really *must* go now, that this is time wasted, and that the young ladies from the theatre – if one can call them such – will be squawking and twittering on their favourite table in the west-facing window of the Refreshments Room, and she has arrangements to make with them for tomorrow. But still, she lingers.

‘Expect it’s the same as here in the dark, is it?’ And the girl laughs back, and glancing at her, Ellen fears mockery, but

The Golden Hour

there is nothing except shyness temporarily overcome in her pale eyes.

‘I’m Lily,’ the young woman goes on, and a gloved hand is being held out for Ellen to take. ‘Lily March.’

‘Miss Harper.’ For a moment, Lily’s hand sits snug inside Ellen’s own, as if it was fashioned to be there. A baby cries. The band starts up. Ellen’s fingers slip free.

Ellen waits until the band has played three more songs, before she asks. By then she knows Lily works with her mother and sister in a laundry, that she lives in the tenements in Albion Hill, that she has never left Brighton in all her seventeen years, nor taken a dip in the sea. And that her pa – and here Lily’s face flares a sudden angry red – her pa is in lock-up for a year for doing something he shouldn’t, and her Uncle Jack is down from Manchester to keep the house in order. He ain’t much of an uncle, she says, her voice turned flat, no matter what her ma likes to think, and truth is, Lily can’t bear him, and so she has decided.

‘Decided?’ Ellen asks gently.

‘To leave,’ Lily says, with a sniff. For Worthing . . . or Margate, or – brightening a little – up north to Blackpool, for she’s heard of the pleasure pier, all lit up electric, and she’s sure the northerners’ clothes must get just as filthy as theirs down here. She’ll find a job in a laundry like the one she has now, except without her ma taking every last penny she earns.

‘But first . . .’

‘You need money.’

A nod. A look of both wariness and hope. With a small thrill, Ellen realises she is the first person Lily has spoken to of this; she is a confidante.

Jacquie Bloese

‘For my train fare and . . .’

‘Your first week of lodgings and . . .’

‘A case for my things . . .’

‘And a little extra for incidentals.’

‘*Incidentals.*’ Lily tries out the word and smiles. ‘Yes.’

How delicious, the ripple of this exchange, Ellen thinks, this sharing of thoughts. And how fortunate that she is in a position to help someone who truly needs it.

‘Miss March.’ Ellen lowers her voice and leans in towards her. ‘How would you like to have your photograph taken?’

‘If she’s not here soon, the best of the light will be gone.’ Reynold Harper emerges from underneath the camera and claps his hands at the tabby cat, flexing its claws with enthusiasm on the worn velvet nap of the chaise longue. ‘Stop that, Floss, you little pest.’ Scooping the purring cat into his arms, he joins his sister at the window. ‘Remind me where you found this one again?’

‘The pier.’ Ellen tries to keep her voice level, as she scours the terraced street for signs of Lily March. At this hour, soft syrupy sunlight turns the crooked houses of Booth Lane the colour of melted butterscotch, and one might almost turn a blind eye to the peeling paint and rusting windows, the gutters choked with filth. She turns and removes a coil of dark-brown hair from the chaise, and then another, fairer and straight: they’d had the tableaux girls from the Empire in earlier and they were worse than Floss for moulting.

The faintest of taps at the front door draws her back to the window, and yes, there is Lily, in her straw hat with the dent in it, looking anxiously up and down the street, pulling her coat to her as if the day is a cold one – and the burst of

The Golden Hour

happiness Ellen feels startles her and she has to turn away from her brother so he cannot see it in her eyes.

‘She’s jumpy as a box of frogs,’ Reynold grumbles. ‘You did tell her she’ll have to show her face?’

Of course, Ellen calls out, halfway down the narrow staircase to the front door now, smoothing down her hair as she draws back the bolt.

‘Miss March. A pleasure to see you again.’

Ellen believes herself to be smiling, so why is Lily looking back at her as if she is about to have a tooth pulled? She ushers her inside and they stand in the cramped space at the foot of the stairs, Lily’s hands twisting inside her stained blue gloves.

‘How about a drop of something warming, before we start?’ Ellen tries to be brisk as she leads Lily upstairs to the dressing room, feeling somewhat in need of a tot of something herself, as if she too is about to be exposed. She pours a measure of rum, then takes the chipped walnut music box from the sideboard, counting out a handful of coins to a few wheezing bars of ‘Greensleeves’.

‘Three shillings, as agreed.’

She and Reynold are usually strict on this point: no payment until the work is done, but there is nothing like the weight of a few coins in a purse to lift a young lady’s spirits, and sure enough, Lily’s colour seems to return as she takes the money, and screwing up her face, she gamely drinks down the rum.

‘No one will ever know about this, will they?’ she says, taking off her hat and gloves with caution. ‘Not those ladies with the boards?’

‘The vigilants? The prudes on the prowl?!’

But Lily doesn’t smile.

Jacquie Bloese

‘Of course not.’ Ellen passes her the scarlet robe from the back of the door. ‘You haven’t told anyone, have you, about today?’

‘No.’

‘Then there’s no need at all to worry. And the photographs themselves will be sent far away to the continent.’

‘To France?’

‘Yes.’

‘So I suppose I will go there after all,’ Lily murmurs, chewing at a ravaged fingernail, and Ellen says that’s one way of thinking about it, and then Lily looks at her and for a brief moment they are back on the pier, under the shelters with the chocolate ice melting and the sun in their eyes. Lily offers up a smile.

‘It’s a strange enough world, ain’t it, Miss Harper?’ She takes the robe and disappears behind the Chinese screen in the corner, a forced bravado in her tone. ‘Everything off, like I was taking a bath?’

‘That’s right.’

And Ellen waits as hooks are unfastened, and buttons fumbled over, until the entire mille-feuille of petticoats and stockings and stays are unpeeled, and Lily re-appears in the robe, which trails on the floor behind her as Ellen asks her to sit at the mirror. Such an elegant neck she has, Ellen thinks, as milky and pale as the poor girl’s hands are rough and red, hands which are trembling slightly in the dip of her lap.

‘Remember,’ Ellen says, teasing strands of hair from the pins, ‘once you’re in front of the camera, you become someone else entirely.’

Lily stares at her. ‘Who?’

‘Whoever you please! Lily March from the laundry stays

The Golden Hour

here – with your skirts and petticoats.’ Ellen waves towards Lily’s pile of clothes, that lie neatly folded on a packing crate. ‘Ready?’

And together, they go into the studio next door.

As Reynold greets her, Lily keeps her eyes planted to the floor, and he looks askance at Ellen, and she knows what he’s thinking – what a waste of plates, and developing fluid, and time spent over the press – the girl’s as wooden as Punch! But then Flossy jumps from the windowsill, wrapping herself around Lily’s legs, as if summoned to do so, and Lily bends to pet her.

‘She’s a sweet little thing.’

‘And she’ll ruin the exposure, given half a chance. Out you go, Floss.’ Reynold shoos the cat from the room. ‘On the chaise, if you will, Miss March. On your side. Turned towards the camera.’

Her brother is too brusque, too businesslike, that is the problem, Ellen thinks, as Lily perches on the chaise and fumbles with the knotted sash of her robe. This is not one of the tableaux girls who stand on a plinth in nothing but a body stocking, night after night, or an artist’s model, so accustomed to shrugging her clothes off that she doesn’t bother with stays.

‘Let me help you.’ Ellen crouches next to Lily, and deftly works the knot loose. ‘Let’s keep the robe on to begin with. Turn on your side and stretch out, that’s right. Lean your head on your hand – and bend your knees a touch.’

Lily relaxes a little and Ellen slips the robe from her shoulders. She smells of lye soap and milk; her breasts are fuller, altogether larger, than Ellen had imagined. And with this observation runs a current of shame, and she wishes then

Jacquie Bloese

that the girls from the theatre were back, joking and fidgeting and asking for more drink.

A plum-coloured bruise at the top of Lily's left thigh provides an unwelcome distraction, bringing with it unvoiced questions of who and how often; Ellen frowns and reaches for the powder pot.

'That looks sore.'

Lily flushes the colour of a sunset. 'I tripped, carrying the coal upstairs.'

'Won't be too long before you're married and in your own home, I expect,' Ellen says, torturing herself. 'Somewhere the stairs aren't so slippery.'

'Ma says no one will have me,' the girl says with a humourless laugh.

'I'm sure she's wrong about that. May I?' Ellen reaches for the robe, which is now more off than on, but Lily stiffens; and Ellen hesitates. Ignoring her brother's laboured sigh, she goes next door to fetch a drape: Reynold will gripe about the photographs fetching less, but it's that or lose Lily altogether.

'We'll use this,' she tells her, and trying to treat her nakedness with the same dispassionate regard with which she might appraise a statue in the gallery of a fine museum, Ellen arranges the drape so that it falls from the hips, covering Lily's most intimate parts. 'Now it won't feel so strange.' She scoops up the robe. 'And when you're dressed again, we'll take another photograph just for you, if you like – with Floss.'

'Thank you, Miss Harper.' Lily looks down at herself, letting out a sigh which speaks of inevitability, and Reynold instructs her rather tersely to hold still and look at the camera, and to think of her sweetheart if she has one, or a lad she's soft on if not.

The Golden Hour

As the first plate is exposed, Ellen returns to the window. In the distance, the sea winks at her, a quivering mass of starlings flitting in and out of view to the beat of her brother's instructions.

'Stand up for me, would you? . . . Drop the drape, there's a dear . . .' She won't, Ellen thinks, but oh, she must have, for now he is telling Lily to turn to the side, to clasp her hands behind her back. 'Just so. All right, lower your head, if you must. And hold for three.'

The placeholder slides from the camera; the cat scratches on the studio door, and bidding Lily a cool good day, Reynold disappears upstairs to the attic.

Lily looks after him with a thoughtful expression as she wraps the drape about her. 'What happens now?'

'You get dressed and I'll set up the camera.' Ellen opens the door and lets in Flossy. 'By the window will be best.'

Lily returns, neat in her cotton skirt and shirtwaist. She stares at the array of photographs tiling the wall above the fireplace as if noticing them for the first time, then lets out a little squeal.

'That's Harry Smart! Ain't it?'

'That's right.' If Ellen had her way, there would be no picture of the Empire's most talked-about performer, twirling her cane in her pinstripe trousers and tailcoat – she doesn't care for the woman, who, in her opinion, gets quite enough attention already. Reynold, however, insists it's good for business.

'Is she a friend of yours, Miss Harper?' Lily sits in the easy chair by the window, and coaxes Floss onto her lap.

'An acquaintance, certainly.'

As Ellen stoops under the camera and looks at Lily, now without so much as the nub of a wrist on display, she tries to

Jacquie Bloese

forget the nakedness that lies underneath. But the dips and curves and puckerings all conspire against her, hammering the image further into her consciousness – the diamond-shaped mole just below Lily’s right nipple; even that awful bruise.

She stifles a sigh and re-emerges. Lily’s face is washed clean with a smile, and even if this must in part be attributed to Harriet Smart, Ellen is glad of it and hopes that the awkwardness from earlier is behind them.

‘I’m sure Miss Smart would sign a photograph for you, if I asked,’ she says, taking the cloth from the lens and Lily beams and the tableau is perfect: a ray of sun splintering the clump of cloud through the window, the dozing cat, the young woman whose beauty is a secret which the world has kept from her. As Ellen removes the plate, it strikes her that she has a better eye than her brother gives her credit for.

‘I’ll develop the photograph this evening.’ Ellen glances at Lily and works very hard to sound casual. ‘Perhaps I could bring it to the pier on Sunday? With the picture of Miss Smart. We could take tea at the Refreshments Room?’

She has gone too far. Lily looks anywhere but at Ellen, scrabbling to put on her coat and gloves, as if she were suddenly in the most tearing hurry.

‘Yes, all right,’ she says, and Ellen tells herself it’s just shyness and tries not to mind.

Once Lily has gone, Ellen returns to the studio. She kneels and buries her face in the musty velvet of the chaise longue, breathing in what Lily has left behind, as, up and down the terraced street, wheeling seagulls caw and mock her.

Later, Ellen goes upstairs to the attic, which serves as both a darkroom and a place to sleep, a thin green curtain separating

The Golden Hour

one function from the other. She expects to find Reynold preparing the solutions, but the basins are empty, the bottles of developer untouched. The curtain parts and she catches the smell of hair oil as her brother appears in the navy coat and mustard necktie he wears for outings. He smiles, and holds out her jacket.

‘I have a surprise for you, Ellie.’

‘Don’t you want to get the developing done?’ She glances at the plate holders. ‘They can dry overnight.’

‘The photographs can wait. While I, dear sister –’ Reynold links his arm through hers – ‘cannot.’

‘We can’t afford surprises,’ Ellen sighs. She may only be five minutes the older of the two, yet at times her twin has the knack of making her feel like a punitive parent.

‘I beg to differ.’

And Reynold looks at her with such hope in his green-gold eyes, identical to her own, that Ellen swallows her reservations. It is their birthday next week, it is improbable but not impossible that he has money saved; he may have been listening when she spoke of how much she would like to take to the streets on a Ladies’ Rambler.

She pats his smooth cheek. ‘Then I will fetch my hat.’