



The Wives of Henry Oades

A Novel

JOHANNA MORAN



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BALLANTINE BOOKS

Trade Paperbacks

New York

aimed thumb and forefinger, shooting first his mother, and then Margaret. Mim clutched her heart and reeled a bit.

Margaret laughed and passed the lantern to him. "Lead us in, cowboy. I've grub burning on the stove."

"You're in jolly spirits, considering," said Mim.

"Jolly enough," said Margaret. "What choice is there, really?"

"Have you considered returning early with the children?"

"Certainly not." Though Margaret had, privately. Yesterday while shelling peas she'd given the idea long selfish thought. She'd imagined herself standing on the dock, the ship bobbing in the bright distance. She saw the leather trunk being loaded onto the tender. She saw too her morose and confused children, falling on Henry, refusing to be separated.

Margaret and Mim started up the path behind Oscar. Mim caught Margaret's hand, swinging to and fro, like a schoolgirl. "It shall be a sad day for me when you go."

Margaret squeezed Mim's hand. "Misery loves her company, doesn't she?"



JOSEPHINE STOOD at the stove, humming under her breath. "Auntie Mim! I didn't know you were coming."

"Hello, my darling girl." Mim came into the light, struggling from her too small coat. "Your lamb smells divine. Where's your brother? He promised to show Oscar a rope trick."

"He's round back with the dogs." Josephine left the stove, picking up her embroidery and settling on the divan. "We're training them for the circus. I'm to hold the hoop. I'll wear a special costume done up in spangles."

Margaret smiled, picturing her freckled twig-thin girl done up in spangles. Josephine gave a haughty toss of braids, as if reading her mother's thoughts. "We plan to make our fortune."

Mim gave Oscar a swat to his trousers. "Run along outside now, and I do mean *run*, precious slug. It'll do you some good."

"I'm hankering for grub," said Oscar, moving out of her reach.

"Hanker outside then," said Mim.

Determined Oscar started toward the goulash, like a poky sow toward her trough. "I reckon it's too dark out."

Mim took him by the shoulders and turned him about. "I don't reckon the dark will harm you any."

"Grub shan't be long," said Margaret.

Oscar took the lantern and shuffled outside, calling John's name.

Mim went to the babies, asleep in their cradles. "Oh, the loves," she whispered, gazing down. "What I'd give for a tidy girl."

Margaret came up behind. "Their ears are tidier, certainly. Was Oscar born with dirty ears?"

"Filthy. Chock full of crusty muck, his nostrils no better."

Margaret shook her head. "I don't know what it is. John was a little wax factory from the start." Martha suckled in her sleep, creating a sweet milky foam. Their beauty never ceased to amaze. There was no love like it, not in this world.

"And mine?" asked Josephine.

"You were born with angel ears," said Margaret.

Josephine nodded, as if to say "of course."

"What I'd give," murmured Mim. "Every mother needs a girl of her own." She bent and lightly traced the rim of Mary's perfect pink ear. "Where's the promoted one?"

"He's due any time. Come sit. The water's on. We'll have a quick hand and a cup."

At the table, Margaret dealt a hand of euchre to Mim and herself, and two invisible players. The dogs started up a frantic barking just as she turned up trump, spades, the jack, right bower. Mim glanced at the dark window. "Henry?"

Margaret was already standing, collecting the cards, returning

them to the case. Henry would come in ravenous as always. She was searching out the jam when the shots rang out, silencing the dogs. The jar slipped from her hand, shattering. People were coming, heavy footsteps pounding the earth. Mim rose from the table, drawing a long breath of audible panic. Josephine sat suspended, her eyes unnaturally brilliant, needle drawn up. The front door blew open, driving in a raft of brown-skinned males.

Josephine cried out. "Mama!"

Margaret shouted, her heart roaring with fear, "Into the bedroom!" But there was no time.

The Maori filled the room, brandishing rifles and whips, a hideous tattooed four, with mouths yawning wide, tongues wagging obscenely.

The babies wailed in high-pitched unison. Josephine still hadn't moved. Margaret crooned to her petrified girl, her voice crackling. "Don't be afraid, darling. Mama's here. Father's coming." *Please, God. I beg you. Bring him now.*

She backed toward the cradles, considering weapons—the finely honed butcher knife, Henry's black pistol in the bedroom. "What do you want? Get out. You've the wrong house. I insist you leave immediately. My husband will have your bloody heads on a pike."

Mim ducked toward the door. A squat one blocked her path, latching onto her arm. She screeched, spittle flying. "If you've harmed my boy, so help me God, I shall pull your misbegotten cock out by the root and make a dog's supper of it!"

Margaret bent and scooped up Mary. In the next instant the howling baby was wrenched from her arms and stuffed inside a flax sack. She fell on the sweating creature, clawing, drawing blood. He shoved her off. She staggered, knocking back Henry's chair. Margaret shrieked, searing her throat. "Please, God! My baby!"

The squat one went for Martha, doing the unspeakable same with her.

"In the name of our Lord Jesus! Have mercy. Is it money you want?"

Her arms were yanked back, her wrists bound with rough twine.

Two wrestled with Mim, but she evaded them, flailing wildly, screaming. "Animals! Lowly stinking shit-eating swine!" She threw back her head and delivered a shrill hog-call of a racket.

The one by the door came forward, leaving an unguarded opening behind him.

Margaret shouted, "Run, Pheeny, run!"

Josephine came alive and bolted for the door. The man lunged, yanking Josephine back by a braid. She squealed in pain and sank her teeth into his hand. He raised his rifle, as if to strike. Mim lowered her head and charged, ramming him from behind. "Leave her be, ye sodding savage!"

The monster spun around without releasing Josephine. He caught Mim beneath the chin with the butt of his rifle. Her head snapped back, eyes rolling white, blood streaming from her nostrils. She fell in a heap, one plump arm crossing her face, the other beneath her.

Margaret whispered Mim's name, choking on phlegm and tears. She pleaded with God, with Jesus. But Mim did not stir. Margaret started for Josephine. The youngest-looking bastard, barely older than John, came between them. He caught Margaret's forearm and marched her toward the door. He was a full head shorter. Nits crawled in his greasy hair. She begged the wretched child. "Please, sir. Allow me my babies."

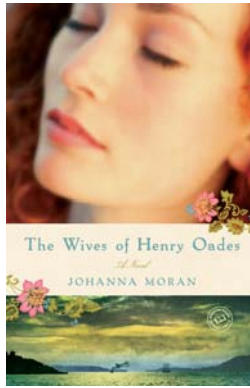
He balled up a foul-tasting rag and forced it past her teeth.

"Mama," sobbed Josephine. Then she too was gagged.

They were goaded forward, out the door. Margaret strained, searching out her babies in the dark, the sacks that held them. Behind them a torch was lit and put to the curtains she'd only just hemmed and hung.

Outside, Oscar was trussed like a lamb and positioned belly down on the back of a horse. He looked up expectantly as Margaret and Josephine were brought out of the burning cottage, letting out a heartbreaking keen when his mother did not appear. John was tied, but on his feet, wet horror gleaming in his eyes. He mouthed to Margaret as she passed, "They murdered the dogs." The nit-boy jerked her forward. *Oh Jesus, please.*

A rant of prayer coursed on in her brain. Margaret fixed her gaze on the pitted road from town. She beseeched God to intervene, to spare her children, to bring Henry now. The fear was a salty, blinding, viscous thing, clogging her throat and ears. They started toward the river, she, John, and Josephine on foot, a Maori each between them. The men chattered among themselves, speaking their bastard tongue, laughing now and again, drowning out her babies' muffled cries. For a time she heard both Mary and Martha, and then, eventually, only Mary.



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ISBN 978-0-345-51095-2

Printed in the United States of America

www.randomhousereaderscircle.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Book design by Caroline Cunningham