

#9 - Mary Lilly, Mollie

After a moment, he goes out; MOLLIE hears someone approaching and tries to hide the book. The Superintendent MARY LILLY enters, swiftly goes right to where MOLLIE has hidden the book, and picks it up.

LILLY: Where did you get this? You know very well you've given up all your privileges. (MOLLIE turns away in disgust.) Outside the walls of this Workhouse educating yourself is not just a privilege, but a basic right. But, by breaking the law, you have sacrificed your rights. Now you must earn them back, one by one. (baiting her.) Maybe then you will appreciate them.

MOLLIE (turning, unable to remain silent): I appreciate my rights as I do my heartbeat!

LILLY (pouncing): You mean then that you take them for granted. (a beat; mirthful.) How strange to hear such big talk from such a little girl.

MOLLIE: The size of the woman apparently has nothing to do with the size of her mind.

LILLY: I didn't come here to fight.

MOLLIE: Then leave.

A beat. MOLLIE turns away. LILLY reads the cover of the book, makes a sound of disgust.

LILLY: Theories! Pie in the sky. Here. (LILLY tosses the book on the bed. MOLLIE looks at it hungrily, but leaves it.) Go on, take it. I'm extending the privilege, gratis. (MOLLIE doesn't move. LILLY takes the book.) All right, it's gone. My God, you're stubborn! You could have all the books you want; in fact, I'd even go to the public library for you.

MOLLIE: The books I want you would be afraid even to touch.

LILLY: You underestimate me. I'm not an anarchist, but I am a liberal. I supported Wilson. (MOLLIE scoffs.) He would give us women the vote, if the Republicans would let him! (MOLLIE laughs at her.) Oh, never mind. It's clear you and I will never agree on politics. The point is, I would get the books for you. Perhaps this will come as a surprise to you, but no matter how much they grumble, the girls here respect me a great deal. Some of them have never had someone to care for them the way we do. They come in like ragged strays, in desperate need of both discipline and encouragement. By the time they leave, they're meek as lambs.

MOLLIE: And how many lambs come running right back to the pen?

LILLY: Far too many, it's true. The more they take to the mothering, the harder it is to wean them when they come to the end of their term. That's why I try to seem so callous at times.

MOLLIE: You don't need to try.

LILLY: But it doesn't always work. Imagine! They would actually rather stay here in prison than go back out into the world. A few very special ones we allow to stay on as supervisors in the workrooms—the matrons you all despise so much. Well, they were once no better off than you. We have a little ceremony in which we hand them the very keys that have locked them in.

MOLLIE: How sad that must be.

LILLY (*taking the bait*): Oh, yes, it's very moving! But it's happy too.

MOLLIE: To see minds so beaten. One might as well be dead.

LILLY (*turning on her*): No! Dead is what you are, sitting here in this tomb! (*a beat; regaining composure.*) I admit in some ways I'm very impressed with you, Mollie. Every girl who comes here at first refuses to work, but after two or three days and nights alone in her locked cell... Well, one morning, long before anyone else is up, the cell matron brings them to my desk—sullen, glaring, sobbing, it doesn't matter. I hand them a broom—

MOLLIE: And they hand you their soul.

LILLY: Yes. And then they can be healed. You can't heal yourself alone, Mollie; your social illness will just consume you, like a fever.

MOLLIE: I am not sick!

LILLY: The really sick ones have to be sent to the isolation cells in the basement.

THE BUG: No one lasts more than a day in one of those.

LILLY: But we rarely have to use them. I suppose it's enough that they're there.

MOLLIE (*a beat; stares at THE BUG; somewhat hollow*): They don't scare me. (*rubbing her eyes; sorrowful, agitated*): Maybe you should just take me there right now.

THE BUG: Are you sure that's what you want? MOLLIE *turns away*.

LILLY: Nonsense. There's no need for that, yet. I say I'm impressed with you, Mollie, and I mean that. *Two weeks* you've been here, and still you refuse to budge! In fact, I dare say in many ways you remind me of myself.

MOLLIE: Then you know that I really wish you'd leave me alone now.

LILLY: Yes. And I also know that you're flattered by the special attention I'm giving you.

MOLLIE: I don't want special attention.

LILLY: No. You don't *want* to want special attention. (MOLLIE *is silent*; LILLY *is smug*.) You think I don't understand you; you think I have a small mind, like the matrons. Well, young lady, I was one of the first women ever admitted to the state bar before you were even born! I wonder if you can even conceive of what that means. You'd think the constant ridicule would stop after a while, but it doesn't, not ever! A year ago I was one of the first women elected to the State Assembly. I would be there still but that just before the last election my jealous rivals went to the papers and made a fuss that the position I had also taken here violated the state codes against holding two public offices at once. I should have seen the trap! (*a beat; regaining composure.*) The point is I have succeeded even so. I have overcome every obstacle—

MOLLIE: No. You have succeeded because you have become an obstacle.

LILLY: I'm trying to help you! I'm talking about real life struggles—

MOLLIE: You talk of struggles like one whose belly has always been full.

LILLY: So that's the source of your bitterness. Well, granted, the Lillys are well off, but there are plenty from my class who make don't make anything of their lives and plenty from yours who do. It's all a matter of hard work and determination. (*MOLLIE laughs in disdain*): I know all about the tenements and sweatshops—

MOLLIE: Maybe you read about them in a book.

LILLY (caught): Well, even supposing that only a few manage to pull themselves *completely* out of the tenements, my point is you can be one of those few.

MOLLIE: I don't want to be one of the few.

LILLY: You can't help it, you already are. My God! (*picks up the book*.) Most of the girls here couldn't even read the title of this book, much less understand the contents.

MOLLIE: They don't need to read it; they live it every day.

LILLY: But they don't understand even so. I look in their eyes, and I see lost sheep. It's unbearably sad. They need a shepherd.

MOLLIE: We are all of us our own shepherds.

LILLY: No. You want to believe that, but deep down you know it's not so. (*a beat*.) *We* are the shepherds, you and I. And better us than the wolves who would simply devour them.

MOLLIE: Worst of all is the wolf who pretends to be a shepherd.

LILLY: Well, the path you've chosen, you would lead them off a cliff.

MOLLIE: I'm not leading anyone. We work together. That's our strength. (*hollow*.)

LILLY (scoffs): If the others are so important to you then why haven't you agreed to work like they do and share their burden? You can't do anything for them inside this cell.

MOLLIE: Maybe they know why I am doing it.

LILLY: I'm sure they haven't the slightest idea. They probably think you're out of your mind. I admit I don't understand it either, except that you're just stubborn. And it's eating you up inside, Mollie, I know it is. You need human contact like you need these books. Admit at least that to me.

A beat. *MOLLIE is silent*.

LILLY (gently advancing): Mollie. Why don't you give up this pose? Try to influence them against me if you like, I don't care. I think they'll side with me.

MOLLIE: Of course. You have the police standing just behind you, ready to beat them down.

LILLY: Really! You're so dramatic. You act like this were Mother Russia.

MOLLIE (gloomy): What's the difference?

LILLY: I think they don't make deals in Russia, for one. Which brings me to the real reason I came here, Mollie.

MOLLIE: I make no deals with the devil.

LILLY: Neither do I normally, but there are times when you just have to give him his due. My goal is to reach every single girl who comes here, and like Our Savior, I don't like to lose even one. In short, I'm ready to concede.

MOLLIE: Concede? I don't believe that.

LILLY: Neither do I; the word sounds so foreign on my tongue. But, since we need to build a bridge between us, as a start I'm willing to allow you to have visitors. All you have to do is *promise* to work.

MOLLIE (struggling to steel herself): I don't want any visitors. I will not work for you!

LILLY: You can break the promise if you like, but I'm willing to take that risk. (*MOLLIE is rubbing her eyes, shaking her head insistently; LILLY is frustrated, vexed.*) Why not, Mollie? Why won't you meet me halfway?!

MOLLIE: If for one moment I let you treat me like a prisoner, then I will begin to think like one!

LILLY (baffled): You *are* a prisoner.

MOLLIE: No! I'm a human being.

LILLY: Which is precisely why you need visitors—we all do, or else we shrivel up inside. In fact...you have one now, right outside.

MOLLIE: What? Who?

LILLY (moving toward the door): A friend. (*calling offstage*): You can bring her in now. (*to MOLLIE*): Your best friend, I should think.