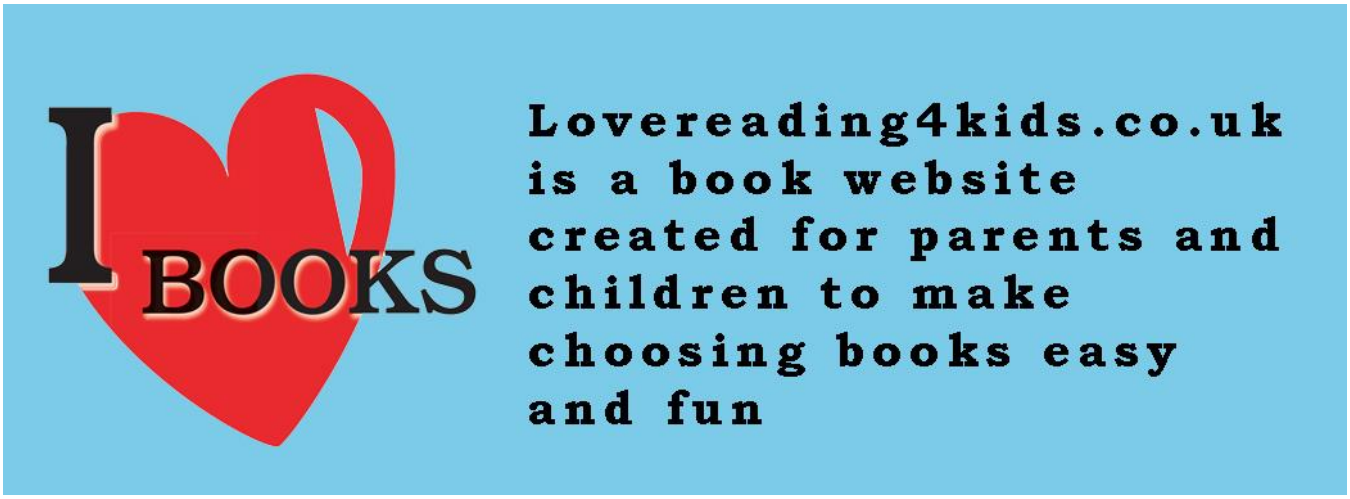


Opening extract from

The Making of Mollie

Written by

Anna Carey

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25 Lindsay Gardens,

Drumcondra,

Dublin.

25th March, 1912.

Dear Frances,

I hate my brother. I know this isn't a very conventional way to start a letter and I should be asking you how you are and whether your house won the last hockey match, and telling you about my health and what the weather's like, but I'm so boiling with rage that I can't think of anything else right now. I know you don't think that Harry is that bad, but really, Frances, that is just because you're an only child. If you had a brother like Harry I know you'd hate him too. He's always been annoying, of course. He loves lording it over me and acting as if he's ten years older than me instead of only two, and he loves the fact that he's allowed to do whatever he wants (well, practically everything), while I always have to ask for permission and never get it (well, hardly ever).

But this time he surpassed himself. We were having roast chicken for dinner, which is my very favourite thing to eat as you know, and when Father was carving it I asked if I could have some of the breast, which is my very favourite bit of roast chicken. And as usual Mother said, 'Now, Mollie, wait until your father and Harry have been served.'

Father said, 'Oh don't worry, Rose, I don't mind,' but Harry said, 'I certainly do.'

If Mother and Father hadn't been there I'd have told him to shut up, but as they were there I just made a face at him when they weren't watching. Which clearly wasn't enough to stop him tormenting me, because even when Father had given me and Phyllis a little bit of chicken breast (the rest of my serving was leg, which I do like too, but not as much as the breast), Harry kept going on and on about how good food was just wasted on girls and that as the men of the house he and Father needed to keep their strength up. And even when Mother said, 'Harry, don't tease your sister,' he didn't stop.

I don’t know why it made me so angry this evening. It wasn’t as though it were something new. Things like this happen at meals every week. Harry is always served before us girls and he always gets the best bits. But for some reason today it was particularly infuriating. Phyllis wasn’t impressed either, especially when Harry started on about the ‘men of the house’.

‘You’re hardly a man,’ she said dryly. ‘You’re still in school.’

‘And Phyllis is going to be at university next year,’ I said. ‘While you’ll still be stuck in a classroom. Nothing very manly about that.’

Harry looked annoyed at this, but before he could respond, Father said, ‘Now, children, do stop bickering,’ and Mother started telling us about Aunt Josephine’s extremely boring plans to start painting watercolours. Actually, I should probably have been more grateful for this news, because maybe if Aunt Josephine starts spending all her time painting views of Dollymount Strand she’ll have no time to call around here every day and tell us exactly what we’re doing wrong. If I didn’t have such an awful brother myself, I wouldn’t believe that someone as essentially decent as Father could have such a dreadful sister. They’re not a bit alike.

But I’m getting distracted. The rest of dinner passed peacefully (if boringly), and then Mother played some new songs on the piano, and we all sang (well, me and Phyllis did. Julia only wants to sing hymns at the moment, and Harry just rolled his eyes when Mother got out the sheet music). But then, after we’d sung ourselves hoarse, Mother announced that Phyllis, Julia and I had to help her with some mending. You know how dull mending is, and this evening Father had to go through some documents or other from the Department, so he wasn’t even there to entertain us by reading us the latest chapters of that epic novel of his. Which meant that the mending was even more dull than usual.

I don’t understand why there’s always so much mending to do. It’s not as though we all go around ripping up our clothes on purpose. But somehow there’s always something to be mended or darned or hemmed or some other fiddly little job, and it’s always me and Phyllis who have to do the worst ones (Julia only has to mend things like old tea towels where it doesn’t matter so much if the stitches are perfect or not. Even though she’s twelve, Mother is convinced that she’s a poor little baby, who can only perform the most simple of tasks. She certainly didn’t think this about me when I was twelve). Some people send out their mending, but Mother says that’s a waste of money.

‘I have three perfectly good menders in the house already,’ she says, and then laughs as if it were a hilarious joke. I told her that I would gladly go without a hideous new school hat if it would help her afford to get things mended but she said I had to have a new hat for school, and besides, my hat isn’t hideous (this is a lie).

So anyway, there we were, sitting by the fire, sewing some buttons that had got loose on my least favourite blouse (me) and fixing a skirt hem that had come down (Phyllis) and a towel that had got a hole torn in it (Julia. I think she might tear them on purpose so she can always have something easy to do on mending evenings and Mother isn’t tempted to give her something more complicated, like a lace petticoat). And then Harry marched in with his friend Frank Nugent, who had mysteriously appeared in our house from nowhere as far as I could tell, and THREW A PILE OF SMELLY SOCKS IN MY FACE.

‘Go on, darn these,’ he said, and sniggered in a particularly enraging way.

Frank didn’t snigger. In fact, he looked a bit uncomfortable.

‘I say, Harry. That was a bit …’ he said, and that was when Mother came in.

‘Harry threw these horrible socks at me!’ I cried.

‘I just told her they need darning,’ said Harry calmly. His face was so innocent you would never think he had been gleefully throwing socks around just a few seconds earlier.

‘Some of them aren’t even clean,’ I said furiously. ‘They absolutely stink.’

‘Harry, you shouldn’t throw socks at your sister,’ said Mother sternly.

I threw Harry a triumphant look. But my triumph was short-lived, as Mother then picked up a grey sock and examined the heel. It was practically worn through.

‘But Mollie, they do need to be darned,’ she said, ‘so you might as well do it now. The clean ones anyway.’

Harry smirked at me in a sickening way, and I glared at him as ferociously as I could. Which must have been very ferociously, because Frank looked a little scared. Harry didn’t, unfortunately.

‘Mother, I’m going to Frank’s house,’ he said. ‘We’re going to test each other on French verbs.’

‘I’m not sure I should let you go anywhere, after this childish carry on,’ said Mother.

‘Oh, Mother, I was only teasing,’ said Harry plaintively.

‘All right,’ said Mother. ‘But don’t be late home.’

If I’d thrown socks in someone’s face and then demanded to go to Nora’s house, I would definitely not have been allowed to go out.

‘I’ll try not to be,’ said Harry. ‘Though we do have so much studying to do.’

And he smirked again at me and Phyllis, and went off.

Frank gave us a sort of apologetic wave as they left. He sometimes seems like he could be quite a nice boy really, but how nice can he be if he’s friends with Harry?

Anyway, I knew perfectly well that Harry wasn’t going to study French verbs, or anything like it. The two of them were probably going to try smoking Frank’s father’s pipe again. Nora and I caught them at it in the grounds of the church last week, and very sick they looked too. Which served them right.

But of course, I couldn’t say anything about that to Mother. After all, I’m not a sneak, even if some people deserve to be sneaked on. Instead, I had sit there and darn Harry’s stupid socks. I should have sewn up the toes so that they’d pinch his feet when he next put them on. But, unlike Harry, I’m not a spiteful, mean-spirited monster. So I just imagined sewing up the toes instead, which wasn’t half as much fun.

So that's why I was so angry. Now that I've written it all down I feel much better. Writing sometimes has that effect, I find. I've thought about keeping a diary, but Harry would probably find it and read it, and then make my life a misery teasing me about it. And if he didn't find it, Julia probably would, seeing as we are forced to share a room. It's so unfair that I have to share a room with such a baby who still plays with dolls when I am practically a grown-up (or at least am no longer a Junior at school). And it's not only her babyishness that makes it hard to sleep in the same room with her. Recently she's started to get very religious in an annoying way. She keeps telling us we should all pray more and go to Mass every day, and has started putting up even more holy pictures and scapulars and things next to her bed. And she spends about five years saying her prayers every night.

Of course I say my prayers too, but I'm always finished in about five minutes, and then I have to put up with Julia looking at me reproachfully out of her enormous green eyes while she prays on and on and on. She was even worse than usual tonight. When she finally got into bed she looked across the room where I was sitting in bed reading Three Men and a Boat (which is awfully funny, you should see if they have it in your school's library) and said, 'You really should say your prayers properly, you know.'

'How do you know I don't?' I asked, without looking up from the book.

'You rush through them,' she said. 'I looked at the clock tonight. It was only two minutes.'

'What were you doing looking at the clock?' I said. 'I thought you were meant to be praying too.'

And she didn't say anything after that. I sometimes think half of the praying business is just for show, but there's no point in trying to convince some of the grown-ups of that. Aunt Josephine thinks Julia is a perfect little girl. In fact, last week she asked me why I couldn't be more like her, which even Mother thought was a bit much.

'I'm not saying there's not room for improvement,' Mother said, looking at me in a way which showed she was at least partly joking, 'but really, Mollie's a very good girl. Not everyone can be as, well, as devout as Julia is at the moment.'

All the nuns at school love Julia, of course. It doesn't help that she looks so ridiculously angelic with her flowing blonde hair. I never looked like that when I was her age. As you know, the rest of us Carberrys have thick brown hair that looks exactly like a set of wavy brown mops (at least, I presume that's what Aunt Josephine's hair would look like if she ever let it down. Which I doubt she ever does. I bet she even sleeps with it up in that complicated bun). But Father says that when he was a little boy his mother (who died before I was born) had fair hair like Julia's. Honestly, if it wasn't for that, I'd think Julia was somehow swapped at birth with another baby, even though she was born in this very house so I'm not sure who she could have been swapped with. She really isn't like any of the rest of us. Not least because she's so good. Even when she's with her friend Christina, they never seem to do anything interesting.

Years ago, Nora's big brother convinced her that when she was a baby, their maid had left the pram outside a shop and then taken the wrong one home and Nora believed it for nearly a year. She was totally convinced that she wasn't a blood relation to the rest of the Cantwells, even though she has reddish hair and dark blue eyes just like her Aunt Alice. Actually, Nora always says she can't understand how she can look so like Aunt Alice, who is very beautiful (and she really she is; men are always writing poems about her and comparing her to Ireland itself) while not being very beautiful herself. Not that Nora isn't nice-looking – I think she looks very nice indeed – but she is convinced that her nose is too big for her face (it's not that big), her legs are too short and that her hair is always falling out of its hair ribbon. Well, the last bit is definitely true. Anyway, at least you definitely know you're related to your parents. You all have such excellent black curls.

But back to the awfulness of sharing with Julia. The other day, after Julia took all my things off the dressing table that we share and made a little shrine to the Blessed Virgin, I asked Mother if I could take Harry's room if he went away to boarding school. Mother said I was being ridiculous, not least because Harry wasn't going away to school when there was a perfectly good school two miles down the road. Then she said that if he did go to boarding school, he'd still have to have a room at home in the holidays. Which I know is fair enough, or it would be if it applied to anyone but Harry. On a brighter note, she did tell Julia she couldn't turn our dressing table into a shrine, so that's something. Julia put her statues and holy pictures on her bookshelf instead, which is quite all right.

Anyhow, I know it's ages since I got your last letter, and I'm very sorry I haven't written to you sooner, but really my life is so incredibly dull. There's absolutely nothing to say. All I do every day are the following things:

~

Walk to school, usually in the rain, which means by the time I get there I am tired or wet or both.

Sit through hours and hours of boring lessons (well, I suppose some of them are all right, but most are pretty dull).

Talk to Nora about how tedious our lives are. And sometimes other things too.

Try to avoid Grace Molyneaux and Gertie Hayden (which can be tricky because Grace is Nora's cousin and all grown-ups love her and urge us to spend more time with her).

Walk home, usually in the rain (see Number One).

Do my home exercises.

Try to avoid Mother, Father, Phyllis, Harry and Julia, all of whom seem determined to annoy me in different but equally irritating ways.

Listen to Mother play the piano and hear her remind us that she could have been a concert pianist if her parents had had the money to send her to Paris.

Read books about people whose lives are more exciting than mine (Please send me some book recommendations, by the way. I feel as though I've read all the good ones in our house AND the school library).

Listen to Father read from his epic novel (actually, that is quite fun).

~

And that's more or less it, apart from Sundays, which don't involve school but which, of course, do involve getting up early to go to Mass. And sometimes there is escaping to Nora's house (or having her come to visit me). But really there is not much variety in my life these days. So you can see that you haven't been missing out on anything due to my lack of letters.

I am trying to think of something more exciting to write about but all I can think of is that I finished knitting quite a nice scarf (blue wool, moss stitch) and that Nora has decided she wants to become a doctor. But she's always coming up with new ambitions. Last year when women were allowed to vote in the council election she said she wanted to be Dublin's first lady mayor, but that only lasted for a few days, so she will probably want to be something totally different soon. Oh, and Phyllis is definitely going to go to University in October, which I suppose means that I will be allowed go there too. But as that won't be for at least four years I can't feel too excited about it at the moment.

And I won't get there at all if I don't work hard at school. It's not that I'm lazy exactly, but I must admit that I don't always work as much as I might. I certainly don't work as hard as Grace Molyneaux, who is absolutely determined to win the Middle Grade Cup. This is a new award that some of the staff at school have created in order to encourage us to work harder. Do you have any prizes like that in your school? I'm not sure they're a good idea if Grace's behaviour is anything to go by. The girl who has received the best marks all term and in the summer exams will win a special little cup, and I haven't mentioned it in my letters before because it is extremely boring, and also I have no chance of winning it. Grace, however, has become obsessed with it and it's made her even more annoying than usual. She's already gloating over what she sure will be her triumphant victory.

Though being Grace, she pretends that she isn't gloating and says things like, 'Oh of course, a silly little girl like me couldn't possibly win that cup! But wouldn't it be awfully nice if I did?'

Meanwhile, Daisy Redmond, who is almost always top of the class, doesn't go on about the cup at all. She works for the love of knowledge and not the supposed glory of a cup. But for Grace it is all about victory and she is always furious whenever Daisy gets better marks than her, even though Daisy doesn't seem bothered either way. Grace is determined to beat her and she (Grace, that is, not Daisy) has got a special notebook in which she takes notes for all the extra study she is doing. I feel exhausted just thinking about all this school-work. All I know is that I hope Daisy wins.

Do write soon and let me know all about your adventures. Your life always seems much more exciting than mine. Maybe it's because you don't have nuns in England (or at least in your school) so it all seems very exotic. Some girls in school think being a nun looks very romantic and important, but I wouldn't want to be one myself. They have to get up practically in the middle of the night and go to Mass every single day and twice on Sundays. Please write soon. Hopefully I will not have died of boredom by then.

Lots of love,

Your fond friend,

Mollie

5th April, 1912.

Dear Frances,

I know my last letter was entirely devoted to how boring my life is, but something very strange has been happening in our house, and it involves Phyllis. Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking: she's generally doing something odd, and it's never very interesting. We all remember the summer she decided she was going to be a poet and went around wearing strange Celtic robes and going on about Golden Dawns and similar rubbish. But now she's being even stranger than usual and it's quite intriguing. I'm not sure whether she's having a secret love affair or whether she's become some sort of revolutionary or even a burglar, but you have to admit that all options sound quite exciting (as long as she doesn't get arrested).

It started last Wednesday at about half past six. Mother was in the kitchen talking to Maggie about the next day's dinner. You remember Maggie, don't you? She's our cook-general servant. Mother always says she couldn't do without her, which is perfectly true as Maggie does practically every useful thing in this house, including almost all the unpleasant jobs like cleaning out fires (a woman called Mrs. Carr comes in once a week to do some of the rough work). And Maggie has to get up at half past six and start laying the fires and getting the breakfast ready. Also, she's a much better cook than Mother is. Or Phyllis. Or me, for that matter.

Maggie is almost like one of the family, Mother says (though she does sleep in a tiny little bedroom, which none of us do, and she does spend all day working for us). Admittedly, she does get much more time off than any other servant I know. Nora's family's maid, Agnes, only gets one half Sunday off a fortnight, but Maggie comes and goes as she pleases as long as all the work is done at the right time. Which it always is.

Anyway, she and Mother were in the kitchen, and Julia was in the drawing room with Aunt Josephine (who I'm sure was telling Julia how wonderful she is – something she will never tell me or Phyllis). Father was still in the office, Harry had gone to his friend Frank's house after school, and I was in the dining room doing my Latin exercises (I still think it's so unfair having to do work at home. Surely the whole point of going to a day school, and not a boarding school, like you, is that you can escape lessons as soon as you leave the place). I was tackling a particularly irritating bit of Virgil when Phyllis came into the room wearing a ridiculous hat and a secretive expression.

'What on earth have you got on your head?' I said.

She nearly jumped out of her skin.

'What are you doing in here?' she said. 'And why are you lurking in the dark?'

The dining room is always dark because it faces north and any daylight that might get in is blocked by the kitchen.

'I live here,' I said. 'And I'm not lurking, I'm just doing my Latin and I hadn't bothered turning the light on yet. It's only just about starting to get dark anyway. In fact, if anyone's lurking around here, it's you. Why didn't YOU turn on a light when you came in? What are you sneaking about for?'

Actually I hadn't turned on a light because I am always slightly nervous about lighting the gas in case it explodes, but I didn't want to admit that to her.

'I didn't turn on a light because it's only half past six and it's terribly wasteful,' said Phyllis. 'And besides, I'm not sneaking.' But she looked away from me and towards the window in a suspicious manner so I knew something was up. She's such a terrible liar.

'Well, if you were sneaking, and you clearly were, you should wear a less dramatic hat,' I said. 'That one looks like you've got half a chicken on your head.'

‘I love this hat,’ she said indignantly. ‘Kathleen trimmed it for me.’

I don’t know if you remember Kathleen. She’s Phyllis’s tall friend with the black hair and the nice long eyelashes. She thinks she’s a great artist, even though the only thing she seems to make are hideous hats. She and Phyllis spend all their time together, though not this week as Kathleen has been laid up with a horrid flu and can’t have visitors.

‘Kathleen? That explains it,’ I said. ‘Anyway, go on, get out. I’ve got lots of stupid Latin translation to do and I need to concentrate.’

‘You could probably do with a little break,’ said Phyllis. ‘Go down to Maggie and get a cup of tea. You look like you’ve been here for hours.’

Now I really knew something was up. Phyllis is not normally concerned about my welfare. Quite the opposite, in fact. So if she wanted me to take a tea break, it was because she wanted me out of the room.

And that was when I had my excellent idea. Frances, I think I might be a natural detective. Remember the Christmas when we read all the Sherlock Holmes stories? They must have rubbed off on me because I suddenly knew exactly what to do.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Would you like a cup too?’

‘What? Oh, no, no,’ said Phyllis. ‘I think I might ... have a lie down. I don’t feel very well. Maybe I’ve got Kathleen’s flu.’

I told you she was a terrible liar.

‘You do look a bit pale,’ I said, and I left the room. But I didn’t close the door fully behind me. And I didn’t go to the kitchen. I stayed out in the hall, and I peered back through the door crack. Which is how I saw Phyllis open the dining room window, climb out into the back garden, run across the garden and then gently open the back gate and sneak – yes, sneak is the only word for it – into the lane behind the house. And then off she went, goodness knows where.

Phyllis is not the sort of person who likes climbing and running at the best of times, so if she was leaving the house via the window, it was only because she really, really wanted to get out without Mother knowing about it. But where was she going? That is what I still want to find out. It couldn’t have been to Kathleen’s house because she wouldn’t have needed to sneak off there. Besides, we all knew Kathleen has the flu.

And not only do I not know where Phyllis went, I don’t even know what time she came home. She must have come in through the kitchen door because I came into the drawing room at about nine to say goodnight to Mother and Father and she was sitting there reading a book, looking like the sort of well-behaved young lady who would never dream of creeping out a window.

And to make things even more mysterious, on Sunday she went out with Kathleen, who had recovered from her flu, supposedly to spend the day at Kathleen’s aunt’s house. This aunt was having a visit from some friend from England who is a professional singer and who was going to perform some Thomas Moore songs for a select group of guests. But the next morning I went into Phyllis’s room to borrow a hair ribbon (I really did need one. I was NOT sneaking) while she was downstairs finishing her breakfast and I saw the hat she’d been wearing the day before on top of her wardrobe. And amid all the feathers and trimmings I could see what definitely looked like flour mixed up with horrible old cabbage leaves. Which would be a peculiar trimming even by Kathleen’s standards, and besides, those leaves definitely hadn’t been there the previous morning.

And if that all weren’t enough to make any sensible girl suspicious (and I think you’ll agree, Frances, that I am always very sensible), this isn’t the only mysterious thing she’s done recently. There’s all the strangeness with Maggie too.

Even though it feels like Maggie has been here all my life, like my parents, she actually only came to work for us when I was about four and she’s really closer to Phyllis’s age than my mother’s – I think she’s about thirty now. And she and Phyllis have always got on well. But recently they seem to have become even closer. Over the last few weeks I keep coming into the kitchen and finding her and Phyllis sitting at the table talking very seriously and quietly, and then as soon as they see me they change the subject. I can’t help thinking that this secrecy is probably connected to Phyllis’s new habit of climbing out windows and sneaking off down lanes. I mean, it would be a bit of a coincidence if it weren’t, wouldn’t it? Both of them acting so secretively?

So there you go. Maybe Maggie is helping Phyllis with a secret love affair – like the nurse in Romeo and Juliet, although hopefully with less death and poison at the end. Mother and Father would definitely not approve of Phyllis going off to see a young man on her own. Or maybe Phyllis is either a revolutionary or a criminal and she and Maggie are involved in some sort of secret plot. I must admit neither seems very likely to me – especially the secret plot bit, Phyllis has never been the least bit political, but I can’t think of anything else Phyllis could be doing that would make her sneak out of the house without our parents knowing about it. And I’m not sure how the cabbage leaves fit in with any of this. They remain the greatest mystery of all.

Maybe I’m thinking too much about it. Nora definitely thinks I am. She says I’m making a mountain out of a molehill and that the solution is probably something totally ordinary. But Nora always thinks she knows best. I bet if she’d seen Phyllis climb out of that window she’d think very differently. As you know, she is never prone to ‘wild flights of fancy’, which is how she rudely described my perfectly logical ideas about Phyllis.

‘Maggie’s probably just helping her make a new frock, or something,’ said Nora. ‘You know how useless Phyllis is with the sewing machine. And she probably just sneaked out because she didn’t want to go past the drawing room and be made to talk to your Aunt Josephine. I know I wouldn’t.’

Which was a good point, I had to admit. I didn’t want to talk to Aunt Josephine either (having Latin translation to do was rather a good excuse to stay out of her way). But why would Phyllis and Maggie be so secretive if they were just making a dress? And I don’t think she would climb out of a window (and risk tearing her coat or damaging that dreadful hat, because she really isn’t very good at climbing and she could easily have caught her clothes in something) just to avoid Aunt Josephine. Mother isn’t the most observant person in the world, and if Aunt Josephine was going on one of her rants about modern young girls (i.e. me and Phyllis) and how awful and shameless and Godless they are, she mightn’t even have noticed the front door opening and shutting. But you never know.

Anyway, the gong in the hall has just rung (Mother always tells Maggie she doesn’t have to do it, but Maggie says that hitting the gong hard is a great relief after a long day’s work), so I suppose tea is ready. I’d better stop writing. The teachers don’t read your letters, do they? Or is that just in prison? Boarding school always sounds a bit like prison to me, even though the boarders at our school seem to quite like it. The nuns sometimes take them out to plays and lectures, and the next day they try to make the rest of us jealous by going on and on for years about what a glorious evening they had, though I can’t imagine sitting through a lecture about Ancient Greece, especially with all the staff right next to you, could possibly be much fun. Some of the plays sound quite good though.

Have you had any outings recently? I suppose it's harder to go anywhere interesting when you're in the middle of the countryside. At least our boarders can walk to the theatre. I suppose being in a boarding school in the middle of the city has its advantages. Though of course when you do get to go on outings you can go to London, which is much more exciting. I'm still awfully jealous of you getting to go to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square last year, even if you did trip and almost fall right on top of that Raphael painting.

Thanks awfully for the book recommendations. I've read a few of them already. I read Northanger Abbey a few months ago. Isn't it terribly good? I do like reading about girls who are our age – well, practically our age. I wish there were more books like that.

Write back soon,

Lots of love,

Mollie

P.S.

I should have told you that I have continued to keep a close eye on Phyllis since that evening, but she doesn't seem to have left the house by any strange means again. In fact, nobody has behaving oddly, or at least no more oddly than usual. Even Harry has been relatively subdued. This evening we all sat in the sitting room while Father read out the latest chapter of his epic story. I do wonder what his superiors in the Department would say if they knew about his literary ambitions. I have a suspicion that he sometimes writes the story in his office when he's meant to be doing whatever civil servants do all day (I am never entirely sure what that is).

'If only I'd found my calling sooner,' he said tonight, 'I would have earned a crust through my pen, instead of becoming a mere cog in the apparatus of government.' This is Father's flowery way of saying 'civil servant'. 'In fact,' Father went on, 'some day I might hand in my notice to Mr. Radley and devote myself to my art.' Mr. Radley is the Department's Permanent Secretary.

'I don't think that's a very good idea,' said Julia. She looked genuinely worried, though the rest of us knew that Father was joking (or at least partly joking).

'Neither do I, especially because you might not be able to earn a very big crust,' I said. 'Nora's uncle James is a writer and you should see his suits. They're practically all patches.'

This was a bit of an exaggeration, but not much. Nora's uncle James is frightfully nice but he's very hard up (and his suits really do look a bit shabby; the cuffs are always worn to shreds). Though I suppose he is a journalist and not a famous novelist, which is what Father wants to be.

'Oh don't worry,' said Father. 'I will continue to slave for the government and keep you all in the style to which you've clearly become accustomed. Now, who wants to hear Chapter Ten?"

And though, as usual, we all groaned and pretended we didn't want to hear it at all, we did really, because Father's story is actually quite good. To be honest, it's so good that sometimes I wonder if he really COULD earn a decent-sized crust through his pen. It is all about a young man who is falsely accused of stealing some jewels (he says he was inspired by The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins, which is also very good and also about stolen jewels). The young man in Father's story, whose name is Peter Fitzgerald, has to go on the run and is pursued by both the forces of the law and a gang of jewel thieves who are convinced he has the jewels on his person (which of course he doesn't, as he never stole them in the first place).

We have now reached a bit in which Peter Fitzgerald is hiding in the cottage of a mysterious old lady. Harry thinks she is going to betray him to the gang 'because women have no sense of loyalty' but I totally disagree. Father is not giving anything away. He says we will have to wait and see. But I wonder if he suspects that there is a mystery going on in his very own house with his very own eldest daughter?

9th April, 1912.

Dear Frances,

Thank you for your letter. I am very relieved to find out that the teachers don't read your post, though Nora said I probably should have checked that before I sent you anything. She said in most schools they actually do read your post, which I am sure is illegal. But Nora said those sort of laws didn't count at school, which seems terribly unfair to me.

And your lovely teachers are taking you to Stratford, how thrilling! I used to think Shakespeare was awfully boring, but actually this year we have been reading Romeo and Juliet and he's not bad, really. As You Like It is meant to be jolly good so I'm sure seeing it in Shakespeare's native land (so to speak) will inspire you when you're putting on your own drama club play. I agree that you should write your own play but don't be discouraged if your classmates want to do something tried and tested (i.e. old) instead. Genius, as Professor Shields sometimes tells us in English class, isn't always recognised.

Anyway, you may be interested to hear that Phyllis is now behaving in an even more mysterious fashion. Yes, I thought the cabbage leaves and window-climbing was strange enough, but now she is receiving secret packages. Yesterday I was walking back from school when I noticed her walking ahead of me down Drumcondra Road with a strange woman in a dark green coat. It looked as if they were talking very intensely. And when they reached the corner of Clonliffe Road, the other woman passed Phyllis some sort of bundle. I couldn't see what it was, only that it wasn't very big, because Phyllis immediately shoved it into the bag she was carrying. Then the mysterious women crossed the road and went down Clonliffe Road and Phyllis kept going towards our house.

I caught up with Phyllis before she got there, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when I tapped her on the shoulder.

'It's only me,' I said. 'Who did you think it could be? A policeman?'

I hoped she might turn pale with guilt and reveal her dreadful secrets but she just looked annoyed.

'Don't be ridiculous,' she said. 'I just didn't expect anyone to creep up behind me, that's all.'

‘Where have you been?’ I said.

‘I’ve been with Kathleen,’ said Phyllis. ‘We went to a tearoom in town.’

‘I thought I saw you talking to someone back there,’ I said. ‘A strange woman in a green coat.’

And then Phyllis did turn pale. At least, a little paler than usual. But only for a second.

‘Oh, I bumped into a friend of Kathleen’s,’ she said. ‘She gave me a book she’d promised to lend her. She can’t visit because she doesn’t want to catch the flu. Kathleen’s sister’s come down with it now.’ Kathleen’s family do seem to be very susceptible to germs.

Anyway, I couldn’t prove this wasn’t true, because maybe the woman in the coat actually is a friend of Kathleen’s with a great fear of germs, and maybe that package was just a book – though it hadn’t looked particularly book-shaped – but I absolutely knew Phyllis was lying. I didn’t say anything, though.

I told Nora about all this at school today, and even though she has no imagination, she did admit it sounded quite suspicious.

‘Maybe she really is becoming a revolutionary,’ she said.

But I told her I didn’t think Phyllis had any political views at all. ‘She’s never said anything about that sort of thing,’ I said.

‘Not to you,’ said Nora. ‘But that doesn’t mean she hasn’t got any. She might think you wouldn’t understand. And she’d probably be right.’

I couldn’t help feeling slightly insulted that she thought I wasn’t the sort of sister someone could confide in about being a revolutionary.

‘It’s not like I’d tell Mother and Father,’ I said. ‘Well, I probably wouldn’t. Unless I thought she was going to do something dangerous.’

‘There you are, then,’ said Nora.

‘But we’re not a very political family,’ I said. ‘Not like your aunt. Mother and Father are just plain old Home Rulers.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ said Nora. ‘People don’t always have the same political opinions as their parents. Otherwise nothing would ever change at all.’

You know that Nora can be a bit of a know-it-all, but I must admit that she had a very good point there. It still doesn’t mean that Phyllis really was up to any revolutionary activities. I will just have to keep an eye on her.

‘You mean spy,’ said Nora. Which sounded harsh, but I have to admit that there isn’t much of a difference between keeping an eye on Phyllis and spying on her. Though as I told Nora, ‘I’m not going to do anything really sneakish and dishonourable like reading her letters or anything. I’m just going to look out for any more mysterious behaviour.’ And that is what I will do.

You don’t suppose she could have fallen in with jewel thieves like Peter Fitzgerald, do you? It would explain the bundle. But that seems even more unlikely than her being a revolutionary.

Isn’t it awful about the Titanic? Julia read some of the newspaper reports and had nightmares afterwards. I must admit I kept thinking about it myself. Those poor people! We all prayed for them. Apparently a senior girl’s aunt was on the ship but they got a telegram and she is safe.

Well done on winning your hockey match. As my school is in the middle of the city (well, you can walk to Sackville Street from Eccles Street in about fifteen minutes) we don’t have as much space as you do out in the English countryside, but we do have a tennis court and a hockey team (there is talk among some of the older girls of starting a girl’s hurley team, which is sort of like hockey, but they haven’t actually done it yet). Luckily, we’re not forced to take part in hockey – as you know I do not enjoy that sort of thing. We are forced to take drill and dancing twice a week, however, and I am absolutely terrible at drill, which is basically just marching around doing stupid exercises, though even Nora admits that I am quite good at dancing. Maybe I could become a professional dancer when I leave school? It would be worth saying that’s what I want to do just to see the look on Aunt Josephine’s face ….

Do write soon,

Fond regards,

Mollie

P.S.

Mother is always telling me off for leaving letters in my writing case for ages before posting them, but for once my bad habit has turned out to be for the best because yesterday evening I made an exciting discovery and luckily I hadn’t put your letter in an envelope before I made it, so now I can add this post script and tell you all.

First of all, I knew that package Phyllis had wasn’t a book as soon as I saw it and I was right. At least, it wasn’t just a book. I think there might have been a book in there too. But anyway, what most of it was was pamphlets. And I know because I saw Phyllis giving them to Maggie. I was slaving away in the dining room at my algebra and I was so caught up in x and y that my head started to hurt so I went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. The door to the kitchen was ajar, and as I went down the steps towards it I realised that Phyllis was in there talking to Maggie. And so, for the second time in just a few weeks, I stayed outside the door and peeked in.

Maggie was stirring something on the range, and Phyllis was leaning against the wall between the range and the big wooden dresser. And in her arms was a familiar bundle. The bundle that the strange woman had given her just a few hours earlier.

‘You shouldn’t have brought them down here,’ said Maggie. ‘I told you, we have to stop discussing these things in the house.’

‘Oh don’t worry, Maggie,’ said Phyllis. ‘Mother never notices anything.’ She paused. ‘Mollie did see Mrs. Duffy give me the parcel, though.’

Maggie turned round.

‘You’ve got to be more careful, Phyllis!’ she said. ‘If your mother finds out, I could lose my place and there’ll be no university for you. And you can say goodbye to the cause, too. You’ll be packed off to one of those aunts of yours and you won’t get near any sort of a meeting if they have anything to do with it.’

‘Mollie won’t say anything,’ said Phyllis. ‘She’s a good kid. She’s not a sneak. Besides, I told her the parcel was a book for Kathleen.’

I must admit I did feel rather sneakish and low when I heard that. There was Phyllis, praising me – she’s certainly never said anything so nice about me to my face – and there was me, spying at her through the door. And yet I couldn’t bring myself to leave.

‘It’s still too close,’ said Maggie. She sighed. ‘How do they look, anyway?’

Phyllis pulled back a corner of the bundle and took out what looked like some sort of leaflet.

‘See for yourself,’ she said.

Maggie’s back was to me as she took the leaflet and I couldn’t see what it said. But she seemed to like it.

‘Well, I must say they did a fine job,’ she said. ‘But like I said, we have to stop discussing these things in the house.’ She took the bundle and put it in a dresser drawer. ‘Anyone could walk in.’ And she turned towards the door. I immediately jumped back and then walked very loudly towards it, practically stamping with every step.

‘Hello!’ I said, pushing the door open. ‘Can I have a glass of water, please, Maggie?’

I was worried that my voice sounded a bit too cheerful, but both Maggie and Phyllis looked so rattled by my arrival I don’t think they noticed I was a bit nervous myself.

‘Of course you can,’ said Maggie, and she went into the scullery with a glass.

‘I’m going to my room,’ said Phyllis. ‘I have lots of letters to write.’ And without even saying goodbye to Maggie, she walked out of the room. I stayed in the kitchen for a while talking to Maggie and eating one of the delicious biscuits she’d made that morning, but all the time that Maggie was asking me questions about school and I was telling her about Grace Molyneaux and what a monstrous beast she’d been to me and Nora during drill and dancing that afternoon – telling Miss Noren that she was afraid we were talking instead of waving our arms about and how we were missing out on healthy exercise – all I could think of was the bundle of pamphlets just sitting there in the dresser drawer. And even though I knew it was sneaking and spying, I vowed that I would have a look at them later, after everyone had gone to bed.

Except I didn’t. I made a very special effort to stay up terribly late. I tried to think of lots of interesting and exciting things so I wouldn’t fall asleep, but I was so exhausted after all my earlier spying that my eyelids started to droop, and the next thing I knew it was seven in the morning. I knew Maggie would already be up, dusting the dining room and laying the fire, but I put on my dressing gown and slippers, and made my way as quietly as I could down through the house. When I reached the hall, I could hear the clang of the fire irons in the dining room so at least I knew Maggie would be occupied there for a few more minutes. And then I ran down the steps and into the kitchen.

But when I opened the dresser drawer to look at the pamphlets, they were gone! I should have known Maggie wouldn’t just leave them in a place where anyone could find them, not when she was so worried about having them in the house. She must have given them back to Phyllis, or hidden them away somewhere safer. And even I wasn’t going to be so low as to root around in her private things.

I closed the drawer and cut myself a slice of slightly stale bread and butter. I always think better when I’m eating something. Maggie had already made herself a pot of tea and it was still warm so I poured myself a cup and sat down at the kitchen table. I didn’t feel entirely happy about spying on Maggie and Phyllis, and as a matter of fact I still don’t, but now I’ve started investigating this mystery it really is very difficult to stop. Could I, I wondered, just drop the whole thing? Or could I just ask Phyllis or Maggie outright what is going on? But even if I did, I thought, chewing the bread and butter, they probably wouldn’t tell me. I was just thinking about this when the kitchen door opened and Maggie came in. She nearly dropped the dustpan she was holding when she saw me.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’ she said. ‘It’s usually hard enough to get you out of that bed in the morning.’

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ I said. Another lie. ‘You don’t mind me taking some of your tea, do you?’

‘Of course I don’t,’ said Maggie. ‘There’s plenty in the pot. But that’s yesterday’s bread.’

‘I don’t mind,’ I said.

‘Well, the baker will be along soon with a fresh loaf,’ she said. ‘And if you’ll excuse me, early bird, I’ve got to sweep the stairs now.’ And she headed out the door. I almost asked her about the pamphlets, but I didn’t dare. She’d know I’d been spying if I did, and I really did feel guilty about it. But I still do want to find out what it’s all about. It looks like Phyllis and Maggie really are revolutionaries after all. Why else would they have pamphlets?

I definitely am going to seal and post this letter now. I’ll write again as soon as something else happens. Surely I will find out the truth soon?