

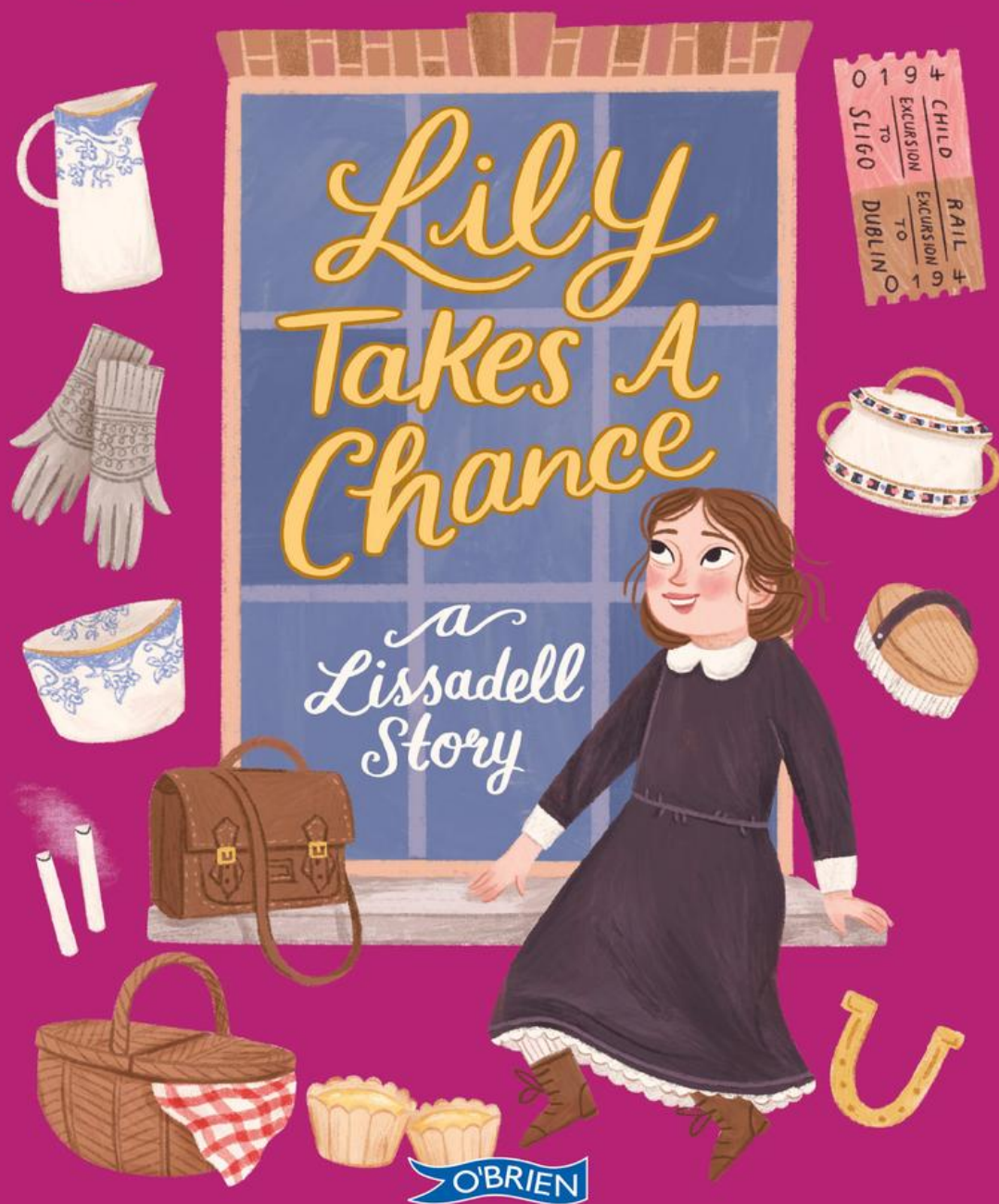
Judi Cuklin

IRISH BOOK AWARD WINNER



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Praise for the 'Lissadell' series

'A thoroughly enjoyable read and sure to become
a favourite in Irish households.'

Children's Books Ireland

'This historical setting, giving an insight into
social-class division, makes the Lissadell series
among her most accomplished yet.'

Evening Echo

Judi Curtin

Lily
Takes A
Chance

a
Lissadell
Story



THE O'BRIEN PRESS
DUBLIN

This book is dedicated to my lovely parents
who both died while I was working on the Lily
series.

Thank you for loving and supporting me
always.

I miss you.



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Chapter One

*'D*id you hear the great news, Lily?'

I hurried towards my friend and put down my bucket, sloshing warm soapy water all over the floor.

'Please say we're getting a day off?' I said. 'Or a half day - even an hour would do me. I think I'll die if I have to clean another floor or make another bed.'

'Sorry,' said Nellie, using her mop to clean up the mess I'd made. 'It's not time off, but it *is* good news all the same. Lady Mary's got a huge, big bag of wool for us, and it's navy blue - isn't that great? It will be a lovely change for the soldiers.'

For months now we'd been knitting socks and vests for the poor young soldiers who were fighting across the sea in France and Belgium, and while I *was* fed up of the grey wool we'd been using, I'd been hoping for better news than that.

'Aren't you happy?' asked Nellie. 'Lady Mary said she'll send the wool to our room later so we can get started tonight.'

Nellie was so sweet and kind, and never sought anything for herself. All she wanted was to be a housemaid at Lissadell forever. That wasn't enough for me, though. I loved my friends, but I found the days long and boring. Sometimes my dream of being a teacher seemed so far away I might never, ever reach it - but as I looked into my friend's shining blue eyes, I had to smile back at her.

‘I’m happy that you’re happy,’ I said. ‘But don’t you sometimes ...?’

I stopped talking as I heard footsteps coming up the servants’ stairs.

‘It’s Mrs Bailey!’ said Nellie in a panic, starting to mop furiously.

Even though Nellie never did anything wrong, she was a bit afraid of the housekeeper, who was strict, but kind and fair.

The steps came closer, but when the door opened it wasn’t Mrs Bailey.

‘Lily!’ said Maeve, rushing towards me. ‘There you are, I’ve been looking everywhere. I’ve missed you *so much*.’

‘Oh, Maeve, I’ve missed you too,’ I said. This was true. Maeve de Markievicz was a young lady and part of the family who owned Lissadell House. Mostly she lived with her grandmother, Gaga, in a house called Ardeevin. She missed her father who lived abroad, and her mother, Countess Markievicz, who lived in Dublin. Maeve loved adventure and excitement and when she visited Lissadell everything seemed brighter and much more fun.

‘Oh, hello, Nellie,’ said Maeve then. ‘How are you?’

‘Hello, Miss Maeve,’ said Nellie politely. ‘I’m fine, thank you. How are you?’

I sighed. My friends were very different, and no matter how hard they tried, I knew they would never be friends with each other.

‘I’m going to see Star, the pony,’ said Maeve. ‘Would you like to come, Lily?’

I preferred most things to mopping floors, so that wasn’t a hard question. Unfortunately, though, I couldn’t always do what I liked. I had a job, and responsibilities.

‘I’ve already talked to Mrs Bailey, and she said you can come,’ continued Maeve, as if she’d read my mind. I wasn’t supposed to be doing things like this, but all the

servants loved Maeve, and bent lots of rules to make her happy.

I turned to Nellie, who, I knew, would end up doing some of the work I was leaving behind.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘There’s not much to do here. I’ll sing to myself, and the time will fly.’

‘Thanks, Nellie,’ I said. ‘I’ll make it up later, I promise.’ Then I skipped after Maeve, feeling free and happy.

* * *

When we got to the stables there was no sign of Teddy, the groom.

‘Hello?’ said Maeve. ‘Is anyone here?’

A boy came out of one of the storerooms. His face was covered in golden freckles, and his untidy, curly hair was the colour of fresh straw.

He stared at us, and I wondered what he thought of Maeve in her gorgeous dress and dainty shoes, and me in my servant’s apron and heavy boots. We were a strange pair to be arriving at the stables in the middle of the morning.

‘Hello, Miss ...?’ he said. He was smiling, and not a bit embarrassed the way my little brothers Denis and Jimmy are when they meet strangers.

‘I’m Miss Maeve,’ said Maeve.

‘And Miss ...?’ he said, looking at me.

‘I’m Lily. Just plain Lily.’

‘I’m Sam,’ he said. ‘Today is my first day. Teddy’s gone on a message. Can I help you with anything?’

‘We’d like to see Star,’ said Maeve.

So, the three of us went to Star’s stable, chatting as we went.

We stroked the pony, and Maeve gave her the carrot she’d brought.

'I can saddle her up if you'd like to go for a spin,' said Sam.

'We can if you like,' said Maeve, turning to me.

I'd ridden Star once before and loved it, but changing into riding clothes would take ages, and I couldn't stop thinking about Nellie, stuck inside doing endless jobs on her own.

'No,' I said. 'You go if you want.'

'It's no fun on my own,' she said. 'Come on, I'll walk you back to the house.'

* * *

I thought about Sam as we walked.

I liked the twinkle in his eye, as if he thought everything could have a funny side if only you looked hard enough.

I liked the way he could easily see how different my position was from Maeve's and yet he still treated us the same.

'Sam is nice,' I said.

'I suppose he is.'

Maeve was always polite to the servants, but except for me, she never paid any of them much attention. In a funny way, that made me feel good, as if I were special to her.

'Are you staying long?' I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

'Just a few days. Then I must go back to Ardeevin for more stupid lessons with stupid Miss Clayton.'

She was being funny, but still I felt a small bit jealous. I was never given a choice about leaving school, and I'd have loved a private governess, and the opportunity to spend the whole day reading books.

'Miss Clayton is being so mean,' Maeve continued. 'She makes me work very hard all the time, as if I were

some kind of slave. She seems to think ...'

Then she stopped herself. 'Sorry, Lily. I know you work much harder than I do.'

I smiled. When Maeve and I first became friends, she never seemed to understand how hard servants had to work – and once we even had a big fight about it. Maeve had never walked in my heavy leather boots, and I'd never taken a step in her pretty silk shoes. Neither of us could really imagine what the other's life was like. Nowadays though, we were both trying hard, and getting better at understanding each other.

'It's all right,' I said, and it was.

'Miss Clayton was so annoying yesterday, I ...'

'Oh no,' I said when she hesitated. 'What did you do?'

'I might have ... well ... I suppose I *did* deliberately knock over a bottle of ink, and some of it accidentally splashed on Miss Clayton's skirt. I didn't mean *that* to happen, but she was very cross, because she wears that skirt every day, so she must really love it.'

I smiled to myself. Some things would probably never change. Maeve would never understand that working people wear the same clothes every day, not because they love them, but because they don't have any others.

'And some drops of ink got on Miss Clayton's shoes as well,' she continued. 'I said she should wear them like that – she might start a new fashion. I was honestly trying to be helpful, but I don't think she saw it that way.'

'And then what happened?' I asked.

'Oh, I said I was sorry, lots of times, but that didn't help. Miss Clayton was in a big huff and luckily Albert came to bring me here, so I didn't have to listen to her for too long. But if she tells Gaga ...'

'And *will* she tell on you?'

'She can't tell yet anyway, because Gaga left on a visit to some distant cousins yesterday morning.'

'And when Gaga comes back?'

'A normal person would forget what I did, but Miss Clayton has a very long memory. She probably will tell.'

'And then?'

'Gaga will tell Mother, and Mother will threaten to send me to England to boarding school – and if she does that ... oh Lily, my life will be over.'

I looked at my friend, who'd never spent a day at school in her whole life. 'You know, Maeve,' I said. 'School isn't such a bad place. I loved the lessons, and I had lots of friends. I was very sad when I had to leave and come to work here.'

'I know,' she sighed. 'I'm sorry you had to leave a place you loved – but for me, things will be so different. I'll have to go all the way to England, and I'll have to stay there for months and months, and never see you or Gaga or anyone else. I'll miss Star, and the dogs and the kittens and even my little cousins. I won't know any of the girls at school. Maybe they won't like me. Maybe they'll be mean to me.'

'Maybe they will love you,' I said. 'In fact, I'm sure they will – just like I do.'

She gave a small smile. 'But maybe they won't. I'll cry myself to sleep at night, and no one will even care. Oh Lily, I don't want to go away.'

'Don't girls like ... well, rich girls like you – don't you *have* to go to school at some stage?'

'Yes. I know I'll have to go when I'm much older – but I don't want to leave for ages and ages, maybe even a couple of years. By then I'll nearly be grown-up, and I won't mind so much. By then you'll be gone away, and working as a teacher.'

I smiled at her. Glad she remembered my dream. Glad she was so sure it was going to come true.

'Then let's hope Miss Clayton doesn't tell on you,' I said. 'Now walk faster, or I'll be in trouble with Mrs Bailey.'

Chapter Two

I hardly make any mistakes these days,' said Nellie that evening as we sat on our beds. 'Soon I'll be as good at knitting as you are, Lily.'

'Soon you'll be much better than me,' I said, smiling at her. 'You've got more patience, and you don't get cross and rip everything back in a temper when you do something wrong.'

She didn't answer, but the touch of pink in her cheeks showed me she was pleased. Poor Nellie learned to knit when she was living in a workhouse, and the cruel teacher whacked her fingers with a stick every time she dropped a stitch. It was a wonder the poor girl could even pick up a pair of needles without crying.

The door opened and Johanna slipped inside. 'Room for one more on that bed, Nellie? I've brought my own needles.'

Nellie beamed at her big sister, and slid closer to the wall. She adored Johanna, and would have made room even if it meant *she* had to sit on the hard cold floor.

Johanna made herself comfortable, and for a few minutes the only sound was the click of our needles, the crackle of the fire in the grate, and Nellie's gentle humming. It was very cosy and peaceful, and it was hard to imagine that in Europe, there was a terrible war going on.

'Will Harry be back to work soon?' I asked. Harry was a footman at Lissadell, and he was also walking out with Johanna. He'd just come back from the war with terrible

injuries to his face. He wanted to give up his job, but Sir Josslyn, who owned Lissadell, wouldn't hear of it.

As usual, Johanna smiled at the mention of Harry's name. 'It's going to be another little while. Sir Josslyn has arranged for him to go to Dublin. He's getting a special mask made, to hide the worst of his scars.'

'Harry's scars *were* frightening the first time I saw him,' I said. 'But after a few minutes, I stopped noticing and he was just the usual old Harry.'

'Lily's right,' said Nellie. 'Why does Harry even need a special mask? Maybe people who don't like looking at scars should get special glasses so they don't see them.'

'That's nice of you, girls,' said Johanna. 'To me, he's as handsome as ever - and I will love him no matter what happens - but he won't listen. He thinks his face will scare visitors to Lissadell, and that's why he's agreed to let Sir Josslyn help him with the mask.'

'Sir Josslyn is a kind man,' said Nellie. 'Now we should be kind and get on with our knitting. There's lots of poor soldiers in Europe with very cold feet!'

Harry had told us a bit about what life at war was like - and it sounded terrible. The soldiers spent days at a time in trenches, which were often filled with water, and their feet were always cold. Warm socks like the ones we were knitting could save them from a horrible disease called trench foot.

I picked up my knitting with a sigh. Women weren't allowed to fight, so we had to help in any way we could.

* * *

'I need someone to run an errand,' said Mrs Bailey next day, coming into the drawing room where Nellie and I were dusting the glass cases of dead butterflies and beetles.

'I'll do it,' I said, dropping my duster.

‘You’re very keen, Lily,’ said Mrs Bailey. ‘Since you don’t even know what the errand is.’

I didn’t care what the errand was. Sometimes I felt like the poor butterflies, pinned to paper, trapped under glass, never free to fly in the fresh, clean air.

‘I’m only trying to be helpful,’ I said primly. Nellie gave a snort of laughter, and I had to turn my head so Mrs Bailey wouldn’t see that I was laughing too.

‘Indeed,’ she said. ‘Now take this note and bring it to the head gardener, and don’t dilly-dally.’

‘Yes, Mrs Bailey,’ I said, and skipped out of the room. Free at last!

* * *

I ran all the way to the greenhouses, and luckily the gardener was there, so I didn’t have to waste time looking for him. That meant I could walk slowly back, savouring my few minutes out of doors.

I strolled along, enjoying the sweet singing of the birds in the trees, and the crunch of my boots on the gravel. I held my head high, pretending I was a fine lady, going to a big party where I’d eat the best of food, and swish my silk and satin skirt as I danced with my rich friends.

The imaginary party vanished into the air as I heard footsteps behind me. I jumped when I felt the touch of a hand on my shoulder.

Was this one of the Gore-Booths?

Was I in trouble, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong?

But it wasn’t a Gore-Booth. It was Sam, with a huge smile on his face.

‘What are you looking so happy about?’ I asked in a mean voice. I was embarrassed, as if he could somehow read my mind – could tell what silly imaginings had been running round my head.

'I'm just glad to see you,' he said. He pretended to look hurt, but his eyes were twinkling in a way that made me smile.

'Sorry. I'm glad to see you too. How are you getting on – now that you've been here at Lissadell for two whole days?'

'I like it. Everyone is very nice to me. I enjoy being around the horses, and the food is the best I've ever had – last night Cook sent us some left-over custard tarts and they tasted like something that came straight from heaven, but ...'

'But what?'

'Here is good, but it's not where I want to be.'

For a second I couldn't answer. Never before had someone described so exactly the way I felt.

'What *do* you want?' I asked, when I finally found my voice.

'I want to join the army. I want to go to Europe and fight. I want adventure. I want excitement. I want army pay, which is so much better than what I get here.'

I knew you had to be eighteen to join the army – (I'd checked ages ago, and was very relieved that by the time my little brothers were old enough, the war would surely be over).

'But you're too young to join up!'

'How dare you say that! I *am* old enough. I'm actually a very small and skinny eighteen-year-old.'

I felt my cheeks going red. 'I'm very sorry, Sam. I thought ...'

'I'm teasing you,' he said with a big laugh. 'I'm not eighteen – and won't be for another couple of years. If I were eighteen, I wouldn't be here, and that's for sure. I'm not going to let my age stop me though. As soon as I can find a way, I'll be in uniform and gone far away out of here.'

'But how?'

‘Don’t you worry about that. If you want something badly enough, there’s always a way to make it happen. Now, much as I’m enjoying standing here with you, I think we might both lose our jobs if we don’t get back to work. May I walk you to the house?’

‘Thank you,’ I said, and we started to walk, not very fast, as if we both wanted to make the chat last.

‘And what about you?’ he asked. ‘Do you like it here at Lissadell? Would you like to stay in this fine place for the rest of your life?’

‘I *do* like it. I’ve got lots of friends and the Gore-Booths are kind people, but ...’

I had so much to say, but I hardly knew this boy. Why would he want to hear all about me?

‘Go on,’ he said, sounding interested. ‘Tell me the rest.’

‘The work is so boring. Every single day is the same. My friend Nellie loves it like that, but I can’t bear it. For a while it was better. For a while I spent one day a week in the sewing school and sometimes I did lessons with little Michael and Hugh Gore-Booth.’

‘And you liked that?’

‘I *loved* that, but now they don’t need me in the sewing school, and Michael and Hugh have a tutor, so it’s back to endless cleaning for me.’

‘My mam loves cleaning. She does it all the time – even when the place is hardly dirty at all.’

‘My mam too, but I hate it so much. I work very hard to make a room nice, and then it gets messed up, and then I do it again and again and again. Every single day.’

Sam broke a twig from the tree we were passing. ‘If this were a magic wand, and I could give you anything at all, Lily – what would you wish for?’

‘That’s easy! I’d wish to be a teacher in my old school, where I used to go before I came here. The Master would teach the big children, and I’d teach the small ones, and I’d like that because they’re very sweet. And some days

I'd teach knitting and sewing and singing to the big girls too - and I'd be kind to them all, not like Miss O'Brien who was mean to anyone who wasn't good at sewing.'

'Miss O'Brien doesn't sound very nice. Would you have to work with her?'

'No. The school is only big enough for two teachers. Miss O'Brien is engaged to be married to a man from Donegal, and the Master says when she leaves, I can go and work as a Junior Assistant Mistress in her place - and I wouldn't need any training or anything. That's important, because Mam could never afford to send me to training college.'

'Well, that's sorted then. Can we do anything to make Miss O'Brien hurry up and get married?'

'It's not that simple. She could take years and years to make up her mind. Once she brought a bottle of milk and one of water for her lunch, and all the kids laughed as they watched her picking up one, and then the other, trying to decide which to drink. By the time she decided, the Master was ringing the bell for us to go back to our lessons.'

'That's funny - and waiting must be hard, but if you're patient, your wish will come true sooner or later.'

'That's the trouble - I'm afraid it won't. There were lots of clever girls coming up behind me in the school. By the time Miss O'Brien leaves, the Master might want to give the job to someone else.'

'Ah, but he probably won't. And where will you live, when you're a teacher?'

I wanted to hug him for saying 'when' instead of 'if'.

'At first, I'd live with Mam, and help her with my little brothers and sisters, and after a few years when they're grown up a bit, I'd have my own little house, but still near Mam so we could go for walks every day when our work is done. And in my house I'd be in charge of everything,