# The Gaol Gate

Lady Gregory (1906)

*Irish Literature Collective · Session Eight reading · Sunday, May 16, 2027*

**PERSONS**

Mary Cahel — AN OLD WOMAN
Mary Cushin — HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW
The Gatekeeper

_Scene: Outside the gate of Galway Gaol. Two countrywomen, one in a long dark cloak, the other with a shawl over her head, have just come in. It is just before dawn._

Mary Cahel: I am thinking we are come to our journey's end, and that this should be the gate of the gaol.

Mary Cushin: It is certain it could be no other place. There was surely never in the world such a terrible great height of a wall.

Mary Cahel: He that was used to the mountain to be closed up inside of that! What call had he to go moonlighting or to bring himself into danger at all?

Mary Cushin: It is no wonder a man to grow faint-hearted and he shut away from the light. I never would wonder at all at anything he might be driven to say.

Mary Cahel: There were good men were gaoled before him never gave in to anyone at all. It is what I am thinking, Mary, he might not have done what they say.

Mary Cushin: Sure you heard what the neighbours were calling the time their own boys were brought away. "It is Denis Cahel," they were saying, "that informed against them in the gaol."

Mary Cahel: There is nothing that is bad or is wicked but a woman will put it out of her mouth, and she seeing them that belong to her brought away from her sight and her home.

Mary Cushin: Terry Fury's mother was saying it, and Pat Ruane's mother and his wife. They came out calling it after me, "It was Denis swore against them in the gaol!" The sergeant was boasting, they were telling me, the day he came searching Daire-caol, it was he himself got his confession with drink he had brought him in the gaol.

Mary Cahel: They might have done that, the ruffians, and the boy have no blame on him at all. Why should it be cast up against him, and his wits being out of him with drink?

Mary Cushin: If he did give their names up itself, there was maybe no wrong in it at all. Sure it's known to all the village it was Terry that fired the shot.

Mary Cahel: Stop your mouth now and don't be talking. You haven't any sense worth while. Let the sergeant do his own business with no help from the neighbours at all.

Mary Cushin: It was Pat Ruane that tempted them on account of some vengeance of his own. Every creature knows my poor Denis never handled a gun in his life.

Mary Cahel: (Taking from under her cloak a long blue envelope.) I wish we could know what is in the letter they are after sending us through the post. Isn't it a great pity for the two of us to be without learning at all?

Mary Cushin: There are some of the neighbours have learning, and you bade me not bring it anear them. It would maybe have told us what way he is or what time he will be quitting the gaol.

Mary Cahel: There is wonder on me, Mary Cushin, that you would not be content with what I say. It might be they put down in the letter that Denis informed on the rest.

Mary Cushin: I suppose it is all we have to do so, to stop here for the opening of the door. It's a terrible long road from Slieve Echtge we were travelling the whole of the night.

Mary Cahel: There was no other thing for us to do but to come and to give him a warning. What way would he be facing the neighbours, and he to come back to Daire-caol?

Mary Cushin: It is likely they will let him go free, Mary, before many days will be out. What call have they to be keeping him? It is certain they promised him his life.

Mary Cahel: If they promised him his life, Mary Cushin, he must live it in some other place. Let him never see Daire-caol again, or Daroda or Druimdarod.

Mary Cushin: O, Mary, what place will we bring him to, and we driven from the place that we know? What person that is sent among strangers can have one day's comfort on earth?

Mary Cahel: It is only among strangers, I am thinking, he could be

hiding his story at all. It is best for him to go to America, where the people are as thick as grass.

Mary Cushin: What way could he go to America and he having no means in his hand? There's himself and myself to make the voyage and the little one-een at home.

Mary Cahel: I would sooner to sell the holding than to ask for the price paid for blood. There'll be money enough for the two of you to settle your debts and to go.

Mary Cushin: And what would yourself be doing and we to go over the sea? It is not among the neighbours you would wish to be ending your days.

Mary Cahel: I am thinking there is no one would know me in the workhouse at Oughterard. I wonder could I go in there, and I not to give them my name?

Mary Cushin: Ah, don't be talking foolishness. What way could I bring the child? Sure he's hardly out of the cradle; he'd be lost out there in the States.

Mary Cahel: I could bring him into the workhouse, I to give him some other name. You could send for him when you'd be settled or have some place of your own.

Mary Cushin: It is very cold at the dawn. It is time for them open the door. I wish I had brought a potato or a bit of a cake or of bread.

Mary Cahel: I'm in dread of it being opened and not knowing what will we hear. The night that Denis was taken he had a great cold and a cough.

Mary Cushin: I think I hear some person coming. There's a sound like the rattling of keys. God and His Mother protect us! I'm in dread of being found here at all!

(_The gate is opened, and the Gatekeeper is seen with a lantern in his hand._)

Gatekeeper: What are you doing here, women? It's no place to be spending the night time.

Mary Cahel: It is to speak with my son I am asking, that is gaoled these eight weeks and a day.

Gatekeeper: If you have no order to visit him it's as good for you go away home.

Mary Cahel: I got this letter ere yesterday. It might be it is giving me leave.

Gatekeeper: If that's so he should be under the doctor, or in the hospital ward.

Mary Cahel: It's no wonder if he's down with the hardship, for he had a great cough and a cold.

Gatekeeper: Give me here the letter to read it. Sure it never was opened at all.

Mary Cahel: Myself and this woman have no learning. We were loth to trust any other one.

Gatekeeper: It was posted in Galway the twentieth, and this is the last of the month.

Mary Cahel: We never thought to call at the post office. It was chance brought it to us in the end.

Gatekeeper: (Having read letter.) You poor unfortunate women, don't you know Denis Cahel is dead? You'd a right to come this time yesterday if you wished any last word at all.

Mary Cahel: (Kneeling down.) God and His Mother protect us and have mercy on Denis's soul!

Mary Cushin: What is the man after saying? Sure it cannot be Denis is dead?

Gatekeeper: Dead since the dawn of yesterday, and another man now in his cell. I'll go see who has charge of his clothing if you're wanting to bring it away.

(He goes in. The dawn has begun to break.)

Mary Cahel: There is lasting kindness in Heaven when no kindness is found upon earth. There will surely be mercy found for him, and not the hard judgment of men! But my boy that was best in the world, that never rose a hair of my head, to have died with his name under blemish, and left a great shame on his child! Better for him have killed the whole world than to give any witness at all! Have you no word to say, Mary Cushin? Am I left here to keen him alone?

Mary Cushin: (_Who has sunk on to the step before the door, rocking herself and keening._) Oh, Denis, my heart is broken you to have died with the hard word upon you! My grief you to be alone now that spent so many nights in company!

What way will I be going back through Gort and through Kilbecanty? The

people will not be coming out keening you, they will say no prayer for the rest of your soul!

What way will I be the Sunday and I going up the hill to the Mass? Every woman with her own comrade, and Mary Cushin to be walking her lone!

What way will I be the Monday and the neighbours turning their heads from the house? The turf Denis cut lying on the bog, and no well-wisher to bring it to the hearth!

What way will I be in the night time, and none but the dog calling after you? Two women to be mixing a cake, and not a man in the house to break it!

What way will I sow the field, and no man to drive the furrow? The sheaf to be scattered before springtime that was brought together at the harvest!

I would not begrudge you, Denis, and you leaving praises after you. The neighbours keening along with me would be better to me than an estate.

But my grief your name to be blackened in the time of the blackening of the rushes! Your name never to rise up again in the growing time of the year! (She ceases keening and turns towards the old woman.) But tell me, Mary, do you think would they give us the body of Denis? I would lay him out with myself only; I would hire some man to dig the grave.

(The Gatekeeper opens the gate and hands out some clothes.)

Gatekeeper: There now is all he brought in with him; the flannels and the shirt and the shoes. It is little they are worth altogether; those mountainy boys do be poor.

Mary Cushin: They had a right to give him time to ready himself the day they brought him to the magistrates. He to be wearing his Sunday coat, they would see he was a decent boy. Tell me where will they bury him, the way I can follow after him through the street? There is no other one to show respect to him but Mary Cahel, his mother, and myself.

Gatekeeper: That is not to be done. He is buried since yesterday in the field that is belonging to the gaol.

Mary Cushin: It is a great hardship that to have been done, and not one of his own there to follow after him at all.

Gatekeeper: Those that break the law must be made an example of. Why

would they be laid out like a well behaved man? A long rope and a short burying, that is the order for a man that is hanged.

Mary Cushin: A man that was hanged! O Denis, was it they that made an end of you and not the great God at all? His curse and my own curse upon them that did not let you die on the pillow! The curse of God be fulfilled that was on them before they were born! My curse upon them that brought harm on you, and on Terry Fury that fired the shot!

Mary Cahel: (Standing up.) And the other boys, did they hang them along with him, Terry Fury and Pat Ruane that were brought from Daire-caol?

Gatekeeper: They did not, but set them free twelve hours ago. It is likely you may have passed them in the night time.

Mary Cushin: Set free is it, and Denis made an end of? What justice is there in the world at all?

Gatekeeper: He was taken near the house. They knew his footmark. There was no witness given against the rest worth while.

Mary Cahel: Then the sergeant was lying and the people were lying when they said Denis Cahel had informed in the gaol?

Gatekeeper: I have no time to be stopping here talking. The judge got no evidence and the law set them free.

(He goes in and shuts gate after him.)

Mary Cahel: (Holding out her hands.) Are there any people in the streets at all till I call on them to come hither? Did they ever hear in Galway such a thing to be done, a man to die for his neighbour?

Tell it out in the streets for the people to hear, Denis Cahel from Slieve Echtge is dead. It was Denis Cahel from Daire-caol that died in the place of his neighbour!

It is he was young and comely and strong, the best reaper and the best hurler. It was not a little thing for him to die, and he protecting his neighbour!

Gather up, Mary Cushin, the clothes for your child; they'll be wanted by this one and that one. The boys crossing the sea in the springtime will be craving a thread for a memory.

One word to the judge and Denis was free, they offered him all sorts of riches. They brought him drink in the gaol, and gold, to swear away the life of his neighbour!

Pat Ruane was no good friend to him at all, but a foolish, wild

companion; it was Terry Fury knocked a gap in the wall and sent in the calves to our meadow.

Denis would not speak, he shut his mouth, he would never be an informer. It is no lie he would have said at all giving witness against Terry Fury.

I will go through Gort and Kilbecanty and Druimdarod and Daroda; I will call to the people and the singers at the fairs to make a great praise for Denis!

The child he left in the house that is shook, it is great will be his boast in his father! All Ireland will have a welcome before him, and all the people in Boston.

I to stoop on a stick through half a hundred years, I will never be tired with praising! Come hither, Mary Cushin, till we'll shout it through the roads, Denis Cahel died for his neighbour!

(She goes off to the left, Mary Cushin following her.)

Curtain