

Mrs. Loring
by Phoebe Roberts

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*Dramatis Personae*

ELIZABETH LORING, a young society widow, mid-twenties  
GAIL MITCHELL, a nurse matron at the hospital, late thirties  
LAWRENCE HARVEY, an orderly, late twenties  
GINNY GRIER, a young girl at the hospital, mid teens  
MILES BRANDT, a young carpenter, early twenties  
LILLIAN HOLLAND, a longtime patient, early thirties  
AMELIA PAGE, another patient, late teens  
CHARLES PAULIN, the Griers' solicitor, early forties

Fairfield, Connecticut, 1918

ACT I

SCENE 1

*(The garden of the hospital, with greenery and a wall. Enter NURSE GAIL MITCHELL, wearing her white uniform and tall cap, followed by a nervous ELIZABETH LORING. A large uniformed orderly, LAWRENCE HARVEY, carries in her suitcase, sets it beside her, and exits.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Thank you, Lawrence. I must say, it's quite an honor, ma'am. To have the wife of a war hero with us, and a Loring besides.

ELIZABETH:

Ah. Thank you.

NURSE MITCHELL:

I know this all seems very daunting to a lady like yourself, but this isn't some state hospital. You'll have the very best care money can buy. You're very lucky.

*(As she speaks, ELIZABETH notices a young man, MILES BRANDT, dressed in rough clothes creeping around outside the wall. Tensing, she watches him until he exits.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Mrs. Loring? Are you quite all right?

ELIZABETH:

I'm sorry, I thought— I saw someone out there?

*(NURSE MITCHELL looks, then shakes her head.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

I don't believe so.

ELIZABETH:

Oh.

NURSE MITCHELL:

Well, no matter. We have a great deal of experience treating your sort of trouble, and our practitioners are on the forefront of pioneering techniques. Fortunately your husband left you well taken care of. You have everything you could need to make a full recovery.

*(Again MILES creeps out, peering around as if looking for something. ELIZABETH stares.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Mrs. Loring?

ELIZABETH:

There's a boy out there!

NURSE MITCHELL:

Is there?

*(MILES ducks away again, but NURSE MITCHELL catches a glimpse of him this time.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Oh. It must be one of the gardeners. We have a lovely garden here, a very peaceful place to spend an afternoon. As I was saying, I think you'll find your time here to be very soothing.

*(A girl's scream of rage can be heard from offstage. ELIZABETH startles. A sixteen-year-old girl, GINNY GRIER, runs in with LAWRENCE hot on her heels. ELIZABETH freezes in shock.)*

GINNY:

Leave me alone!

*(LAWRENCE tries to grab at her, but she dodges him. She shoves past ELIZABETH as she goes, knocking her to the ground. Finally LAWRENCE seizes her. She kicks and screams as he starts dragging her off.)*

LAWRENCE:

Settle down, girl!

GINNY:

No! No! Let go of me! I hate this rotten place!

NURSE MITCHELL:

Ginny, behave yourself!

GINNY:

Let me go! Let me go!

NURSE MITCHELL:

Take her back to her room, Lawrence!

*(LAWRENCE drags her offstage as she screams. Enter CHARLES PAULIN, a polished middle-aged man in a sharp suit enters, watching her go.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Ah, hello, sir. I shall be with you forthwith.

*(NURSE MITCHELL turns back around and notices ELIZABETH still huddled up on the ground.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Oh, Mrs. Loring! Let me help you.

*(She pulls ELIZABETH back up to her feet.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

You'll have to forgive Miss Jameson. She has her own troubles, and she hasn't yet adjusted. Don't pay her any mind. Now. Why don't we get you settled in?

*(NURSE MITCHELL goes to exit. ELIZABETH is unable to move. PAULIN tips his hat to her and exits. MILES pokes his head back in, looks around, then disappears again. The nurse returns again.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Come along, Mrs. Loring. We're going to take very good care of you.

*(After a moment, she picks up her suitcase and stiffly follows after. They exit.)*

## SCENE 2

*(ELIZABETH is slumped with depression in a chair in the middle of the room, staring ahead at nothing. She is surrounded by other empty chairs and in one corner of the room a victrola sits on a table. Enter NURSE MITCHELL, bustling about arranging things and straightening up around her.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Good morning, Mrs. Loring! I see you're settling in. I hope you find our parlor comfortable. You'll be glad of the sanctuary away from the trouble in your lives, I'm sure. After everything you've been through.

*(Enter AMELIA, nervous and fidgety.)*

AMELIA:

Ginny shoved me!

NURSE MITCHELL:

She's in her room now. I swear, Amelia, you are going to wear your hands off if you never stop wringing them so. You ought to take a page out of Mrs. Loring's book.

*(Enter LILLIAN.)*

LILLIAN:

Well, what do you expect, when that well-worn old Schubert isn't playing? However can we reflect properly without that?

NURSE MITCHELL:

Miss Holland, don't be disruptive. Lawrence, the record, if you please.

*(LAWRENCE nods, and exits.)*

LILLIAN:

Don't you misunderstand me, nurse, not that I haven't found it edifying to so closely examine Herr Schubert's umpty-third symphony of... moaning fiddles, or some such... still, a woman can't live on bread alone. One hopes for a sprinkle of salt every now and again. So. Amelia, dear.

AMELIA:

What? What?

LILLIAN:

Deep breath, dear, I've no needle to come at you with. Tell me, girl, what do you think are the chances that today we'll be treated to something a little different?

AMELIA:

It's always the same, Lillian.

LILLIAN:

Ah, but hope springs eternal, does it not? How else would you get up in the morning? For me it's the thought that we might hear something with a little swing for once. Call me crazy.

AMELIA:

You shouldn't say that!

LILLIAN:

But we're all crazy, dear. So. Perhaps a little Irving Berlin? I sure would love to hear what those Gershwin boys are up to these days. Lawrence, my good man, I hear the coloreds are doing interesting things with the brass section.

*(LAWRENCE reenters with a record. He goes to place it on the victrola and puts down the needle. Classical music begins to play.)*

LILLIAN:

Or we could just... hear the Schubert again. It really speaks to a different piece of me every time.

*(Exit NURSE MITCHELL and LAWRENCE.)*

AMELIA:

Please don't, you'll upset them.

LILLIAN:

Not to worry, dear. Just whiling away the time until I burn this Godforsaken place to the ground.

AMELIA:

Lillian!

LILLIAN:

You never do learn, do you?

*(LILLIAN leans back with an expression of extreme boredom and begins folding a piece of paper into origami shapes. After a moment AMELIA turns to where ELIZABETH is slumped.)*

AMELIA:

You shouldn't mind her. She always talks like that, but she doesn't mean anything by it.

ELIZABETH:

I'd like to be alone now.

AMELIA:

I'm sorry. It's only you looked so low.

*(Pause.)*

AMELIA:

I heard how you lost your husband. In the war.

*(Pause.)*

AMELIA:

It was very brave of him. Not many fellows like that would have enlisted.

ELIZABETH:

It was a matter of conscience.

AMELIA:

You should be very proud.

ELIZABETH:

Should I?

AMELIA:

I think so.

ELIZABETH:

What about our little girl?

AMELIA:

You'll be home soon, certainly.

*(Pause.)*

ELIZABETH:

I left her beside an open window in the dead of winter. She nearly caught her death of cold.

AMELIA:

Oh.

*(Reenter NURSE MITCHELL.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Amelia, please stop being a bother. It's almost time for today's session.

AMELIA:

Is... Ginny going to be there?

NURSE MITCHELL:

Everyone must be there, you know that.

*(She exits.)*

LILLIAN:

Oh, no. Just when I was getting into things.

SCENE 3

*(The chairs are arranged around the table. NURSE MITCHELL sits at the center, with AMELIA and ELIZABETH to her left and GINNY and LILLIAN to her right. LILLIAN is sketches on a piece of paper. GINNY fidgets incessantly while ELIZABETH sits stiff and uncomfortable.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Mrs. Loring, why don't you take a turn?

ELIZABETH:

Oh, I... I'd rather not.

NURSE MITCHELL:

Everyone must talk, Mrs. Loring.

ELIZABETH:

All right. Ever since the letter came, the sadness... it's been so heavy. I can't seem to make sense of it. Some days I can't even get out of bed. I think of bearing down on the rest of my life without him... and I feel so lost.

GINNY:

This is stupid.

*(ELIZABETH shrinks.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Ginny, mind your manners. Mrs. Loring, go on.

ELIZABETH:

I feel foolish.

LILLIAN:

Fancy that.



NURSE MITCHELL:

Ladies, please! Mrs. Loring, this is no time for false pride.

ELIZABETH:

Well... the one who really suffers is our baby... our Alice. My head is so fogged that... I can't trust myself around her anymore. She's my child, all I have left of him, and I'm failing her. She deserves a better mother than me—

NURSE MITCHELL:

Lillian Holland, put down that pencil and pay attention.

AMELIA:

What are you drawing, anyway?

*(GINNY goes to look over LILLIAN's shoulder. She burst into scandalized laughter.)*

GINNY:

It's a naked lady!

NURSE MITCHELL:

Miss Holland!

*(She snatches the drawing away and crumples it up.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

I don't know how you ladies expect to see any good from this if you refuse to participate.

GINNY:

I can't listen to this garbage anymore.

ELIZABETH:

I'm sorry, I—

GINNY:

Oh, give it a rest, you dumb cluck!

*(GINNY leaps up and starts pacing. ELIZABETH sinks down into her chair and makes herself as small as possible.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Ginny! Please, sit still.

GINNY:

I can't! That's why I'm here, isn't it?

NURSE MITCHELL:

Ginny, if you can't sit down on your own, I will call someone in to make sure that you do.

AMELIA:

Don't call the guards, they frighten me!

GINNY:

Leave me alone!

AMELIA:

Please, Ginny, just sit!

GINNY:

Shut it, Amelia! Everybody just clam up!

NURSE MITCHELL:

Very well. Lawrence!

*(Enter LAWRENCE.)*

NURSE MITCHELL:

Please help Miss Jameson back to her seat.

GINNY:

Stop calling me that!

*(AMELIA bursts into tears.)*

LAWRENCE:

Come on now, miss.

GINNY:

Don't you touch me!

AMELIA:

Stop yelling! Stop it!

*(LAWRENCE advances on GINNY, but she takes off running. NURSE MITCHELL and LAWRENCE dash after her. The sobbing AMELIA exits in another direction. ELIZABETH remains wide-eyed and frozen in her chair.)*

*(LILLIAN laughs to herself. She gets up and looks around until she finds her crumpled up drawing. She picks it up, unfolds it, and takes it back to her seat. She tries to revive it by smoothing it out on the tabletop.)*

LILLIAN:

We should get a moment of peace now.

*(ELIZABETH stares at her.)*

LILLIAN:

You needn't be so frightened. Despite the specter of the raving madwoman, the only real worry around here is dying of boredom.

*(Pause.)*

LILLIAN:

So you're Mrs. Rowan Loring.

ELIZABETH:

Yes.

*(Pause.)*

ELIZABETH:

You knew him?

LILLIAN:

Everybody knows the Loring's. Particularly the war hero. They cast quite a shadow.

ELIZABETH:

I suppose. But... please, you mustn't think differently of me.

LILLIAN:

Don't you worry, ma'am. This place is where all the fine families hide away their troubles. You're hardly the first society lady to get shut up here.

ELIZABETH:

Rowan was the society. I'm just his wife.

LILLIAN:

My compliments on landing that one, then. If you've got to have a husband, might as well make it a rich one.

*(Pause.)*

ELIZABETH:

Have you been here long?

LILLIAN:

Seems that way. For all their reputation, they seem to be having a difficult time curing me.

*(Pause.)*

LILLIAN:

This isn't a garden party, Mrs. Loring, and the nurse is gone. Nobody's about to grade you on your manners. You can ask.

*(Pause.)*

LILLIAN:

I draw distasteful pictures, I say unsociable things, and I am too familiar with strange men and close women. Or so my fine family seemed to think. Nobody so grand as the Loring, of course, but they've got enough of a reputation for me to run it down.

ELIZABETH:

They put you here?

LILLIAN:

When I became too excessively embarrassing. Isn't that how we all get here?

ELIZABETH:

Oh, no. I mean, that wasn't so for me.

LILLIAN:

Oh, really? It was your idea to check yourself into the puzzle house?

ELIZABETH:

Well, no. But... I had to do something. My little girl...

LILLIAN:

Yes, I heard.

ELIZABETH:

I can't be like this around her.

LILLIAN:

Well, this certainly fixes that.

ELIZABETH:

I only... need some help. It's been so long since I felt like myself.

LILLIAN:

Well. You aren't anymore, are you?

ELIZABETH:

I... excuse me?

LILLIAN:

Mrs. Rowan Loring.

ELIZABETH:

I don't follow.

LILLIAN:

He's dead, isn't he?

ELIZABETH:

I know that.

LILLIAN:

Changes things, doesn't it?

*(ELIZABETH stares.)*

LILLIAN:

Well, I'll say one thing for this place. You'll have plenty of time to think about it.

*(She returns to her sketch.)*

#### SCENE 4

*(ELIZABETH sits in the walled garden, reading a book. MILES appears at the wall, watching her. ELIZABETH glances over, spots him, then turns her head back to pretend she didn't. She struggles to ignore him, but she grows more and more upset.)*

MILES:

Please, ma'am.

*(She startles hard.)*

ELIZABETH:

Good heavens!

MILES:

Please, don't scream.

*(She jumps out of her seat and backs away from him.)*

ELIZABETH:

Who are you? What are you doing creeping around here all the time?

MILES:

I don't mean no trouble, honest!

ELIZABETH:

Please, leave me alone.

MILES:

I just need a little help!

ELIZABETH:

I don't have any money.

MILES:

It ain't like that.

*(He looks around, then, seeing no one, decides to risk it. He hops over the wall to stand inside the garden. ELIZABETH starts to panic and backs away.)*

MILES:

Don't be scared, I'm not going to hurt you! I just want to talk!

ELIZABETH:

Please, somebody, help—

MILES:

I'm looking for Ginny!

*(ELIZABETH stops in her tracks and turns back to look at him.)*

MILES:

They took her away and I didn't know where. Her family's chasing after me, but I tracked her anyhow! Please, can you just tell me if she's here?

ELIZABETH:

What do you want with her?

MILES:

I love her!

*(Shocked, ELIZABETH stares at him.)*

LAWRENCE:

*(Offstage)* Mrs. Loring? Is that you?

*(MILES looks around him in a panic. He shoots one last pleading look at ELIZABETH, then hides himself in the foliage just before LAWRENCE enters.)*

LAWRENCE:

Mrs. Loring?

ELIZABETH:

Ah— yes?

LAWRENCE:

Heard you calling, are you all right?

ELIZABETH:

Yes. I thought— well, I was mistaken. Forgive me, it's nothing.

LAWRENCE:

All right, then. I'll be about if you do need anything.

ELIZABETH:

Thank you, sir.



*(LAWRENCE turns and exits. ELIZABETH stiffly watches him go. When he is gone, MILES emerges and ELIZABETH jumps again.)*

MILES:

Much obliged, ma'am, that was kind of you.

ELIZABETH:

Now, please, just go! Or I will scream, and bring him back after you!

MILES:

Just one more thing—

ELIZABETH:

What!?

*(MILES pulls a folded piece of paper from his trouser pocket.)*

MILES:

Could you give this to her? To Gin?

ELIZABETH:

I can't take that.

MILES:

Please?

ELIZABETH:

I must go!

*(She starts to rush off.)*

MILES:

At least tell me she's all right?

*(ELIZABETH stops in her tracks, then dithers a bit. At last she turns back to MILES and helplessly throws up her hands.)*

ELIZABETH:

I don't know!

*(She hurries off. He watches her dejectedly, then goes to climb back over the garden wall.)*

*END OF "MRS. LORING" EXCERPT*