

PART TWO: THE CITY SURPRISED

7

EASTER MONDAY

IT WAS MORE THAN A WEEK LATER. It was, to be exact, just before noon on Easter Monday. And in all Dublin – in all the world, maybe – there was no more miserable creature than Jimmy Conway.

He walked in Sackville Street with heavy steps like a man on his way to jail. In *Sackville Street*: that is to say, in Dublin city, and not in Fairyhouse. The impossible had happened: Mick had let him down. His uncle had ruined his life.

Mick had called around on Friday evening, looking very upset. When Jimmy smiled at him he looked even worse. He took Ma aside and whispered to her. She became very angry.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ she hissed out loud to Mick. ‘You can tell him yourself.’

Something in her voice chilled Jimmy’s heart. When he looked at Mick’s face his expression told Jimmy that something terrible had happened. And there was only one thing that it could be, and it was a thing that Jimmy didn’t even want to think about.

‘Jim, lad,’ Mick stammered. ‘Jimmy, I ...’

But Jimmy was already shaking his head, willing this new problem to go away. Mick wasn’t going to Fairyhouse. Something very important had come up. He was very sorry. He knew, he said, how Jimmy must feel.

‘Do you, though?’ asked Ma. Jimmy had never heard her sound so angry. ‘Do you really understand how high you had that child’s hopes? What can be so important, Mick?’

But Mick, who looked almost as upset as Jimmy felt, just shook his head. ‘I can’t talk about it,’ he said.

The ice in Ma’s voice changed to fire. ‘Is this some political nonsense?’ she demanded.

Mick said nothing, but his silence seemed only to confirm her suspicions.

‘Mick,’ she said, ‘you’re worse than mad – you’re cruel. What good has any of that rubbish ever brought anyone? And now look at Jimmy! You’ve destroyed that boy.’

Jimmy just stood there. He could feel himself start to shake. Surely Mick wouldn’t let him down because of the union or the Citizen Army? Mick had no faith in causes any more; he’d said so himself.

Mick looked helplessly from his sister to his nephew. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. He was almost crying. ‘I can’t say anything more now.’

He turned around suddenly and walked out. Ma followed him to the door and called angrily down the

shabby hallway after him: 'May God forgive you, Mick Healy, for destroying a young boy's hopes. May God forgive you, because I don't think Jimmy will be able to. I know I won't.'

Jimmy was too shattered even to cry. It wasn't just missing the races, terrible though that was. But he'd spent days telling everyone about it. All the boys had been impressed and humbled. Older boys, who'd normally not bother talking to a kid like Jimmy, had come to ask him respectfully if the story was true. For a week he'd been the hero of the neighbourhood. And what would everyone think of him now? They'd think he was a liar.

Jimmy spent the rest of the weekend hiding at home, sitting in his mother's chair and staring into the empty fireplace. He couldn't even play his thinking game. If he looked at the face of the old clock now all he saw in his mind was the faces of other boys jeering at him, calling him a braggart and a liar.

By the weekend even Ma's sympathy had started to turn to annoyance. Sarah had got sick on Saturday. She had a fever, and there was no money for a doctor. Ma sat up with her till late on Saturday night and then all night on Sunday, when the fever was at its worst. This morning Ma was exhausted, and the sight of Jimmy sitting there whitefaced, healthy and grieving in the chair was too much for her tired nerves.

'I can't look at you there any more with that long face

on you,' she said, her voice cracking. 'Go out and play. Go out and let me get some peace.'

If she'd sounded angry he might have pleaded or cried, but her voice just sounded more tired and sad than Jimmy could ever remember. It frightened him. He took his cap and went out.

At first he thought he would run away and hide, but that was pointless. He couldn't hide forever. His friends would think he was at Fairyhouse now. Sooner or later someone would see him, and then it would all come out. He'd be revealed as a boaster and a liar. He'd never again be able to hold up his head in their company. His life was ruined, and there was no way of avoiding it.

So Jimmy, for more than an hour now, had been walking in Sackville Street waiting for the inevitable. As time passed, and he met nobody he knew, he started almost to wish that the inevitable would hurry up and arrive. Even the jeering, when it came, could be no worse than this waiting.

Normally on a Monday Sackville Street would be full of passing traffic: carts and carriages, horsemen and motor cars, cyclists and lorries. But this was Easter Monday and today it was drab and half empty, and few fashionable people were to be seen. They had better ways to spend the holiday.

It was a fine spring morning, but Jimmy didn't notice. He was walking blindly, not caring where he was going.

He was heading down the street past Nelson's Pillar when he almost bumped into a small knot of people who had stopped short in front of him.

'There they are,' sneered a haggard old woman in a black shawl. 'The great heroes! The Kaiser's friends!' Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

Jimmy stood at the corner of Henry Street, just beyond the Post Office. Following the old woman's glare, he saw them coming out of Abbey Street – Volunteers, lots of them. And the Citizen Army men were with them! Was that why Mick had betrayed him, for a stupid march? Surely it couldn't be true. You couldn't give up Fairyhouse for a march with a let-on army!

As he too glared at the oncoming men, Jimmy became aware of a strange air about this particular parade. There were a lot of men marching, Volunteers and Citizen Army men together. Behind them trundled an odd collection of slow-moving vehicles – Jimmy noticed a cab, some carts, and a sporty-looking motor car. Men and vehicles were heavily loaded with guns and other equipment. Other traffic paused to let the procession pass as it swung out into Sackville Street.

It was the three men leading the procession who drew Jimmy's eyes. Although they walked just in front of the main body, something set them apart. It was as if they were walking in a world of their own, as blind to the real world around them as Jimmy had been.

He knew two of the men by sight. In the middle was James Connolly, the trade unionist. The headquarters of his union were down by the river in Liberty Hall, quite close to Jimmy's house. Everyone in the slums knew Connolly. His fight for workers' rights had made him a hero to many of the poor. He walked along now in the dark green uniform of the Citizen Army, his thick moustache bristling.

On either side of Connolly strode two men in the lighter green uniform of the Volunteers. One of them was a tall, thin young man wearing glasses. Around his throat was what looked like a bandage. The man looked unwell. He was almost staggering as he marched up the street, but Jimmy was struck by the look of pride and triumph on his pale, haughty face.

The third man Jimmy recognised as Mr Pearse, a schoolteacher who often addressed political meetings. He would speak fiercely about violence and bloodshed and death, and many people regarded him as the greatest lunatic of all the so-called Sinn Féiners – a would-be hero who in his school out in Rathfarnham taught middle-class boys to worship bloodshed and mythical heroes from Ireland's savage past. Yet his face too, like Connolly's, like the face of the sickly young man beside them, was odd now, set in grave lines yet somehow peaceful and happy. It was almost as though the three men were surrounded by a light that came from inside them, that had nothing to

do with the real Dublin that they were walking through.

It was unusual to see Connolly and his Citizen Army marching with Pearse and the Volunteers. The two groups didn't really get on. Jimmy looked beyond the three men, at the column still emerging from Abbey Street. They must all be coming from Liberty Hall. Jimmy searched the faces, looking for Mick. There was no sign of him.

The last of the men turned into Sackville Street now, but still Mick wasn't among them. Then, at the very end, came two men with no uniforms. One was a handsome man leaning heavily on a stick, limping. Beside him was an old man with grey, receding hair and a big moustache. Wasn't that the old man who kept the tobacco shop at the top of Sackville Street – Mr Clarke?

What odd people the Sinn Féin leaders were: old Clarke, then the crippled man, the sick-looking young man with the bandaged throat, and Pearse with his fixed stare, and then Connolly like a stocky little bulldog with bandy legs. Yet today they looked different. They looked – yes, that was it – they looked like soldiers, real soldiers, going out to fight for a cause.

Behind the marching men now Jimmy saw some boys of his own age trailing along, laughing and shouting. Jeering the men, Jimmy knew, though this time the marchers were ignoring them completely. The people around him too were making comments.

‘Where are they off to now, I wonder?’ said the old woman in the shawl.

‘They look like they’re going camping,’ laughed a man in a bowler hat. ‘Maybe they’re off to visit their friends in Germany, to collect their wages.’

Some people said that the Volunteers were paid by the Kaiser, though Jimmy had never believed it. He’d heard that the Kaiser was mad and evil, but he couldn’t believe he would be foolish enough to pay good money to groups like the Volunteers.

Jimmy was looking at the boys who were following the march. He recognised some of his friends. They’d soon pass the place where he stood. It was the moment he’d been dreading, and now it was here he was afraid. Should he turn and run down Henry Street? But something kept him standing there, something that had nothing to do with shame or fear. His eyes moved from the boys back to the marchers, and especially to the three men who led them.

The three leaders came level with the General Post Office, only a few yards from Jimmy. As he watched, Connolly called the column to a halt behind them. The men stopped untidily, some of them bumping into each other. Someone tittered. Then the street seemed to grow suddenly still. Jimmy heard an Angelus bell ringing, and mutterings around him, but his attention was fixed on Connolly.

The trade union man drew himself up to his full height. His face was flushed, but still it wore that air of certainty. He looked, Jimmy thought, as if his own inevitable moment had come. But what was going to happen? A speech? A demonstration?

Connolly shouted. Jimmy felt his mouth drop open as Connolly's words reached his ears.

'Left turn!' Connolly was saying. 'To the GPO – *charge!*'

For a moment even the Volunteers seemed stunned. Then someone else shouted: 'Take the GPO!'

Wild yells broke from the column. The men raced in a ragged charge for the doors of the Post Office.

'Lord save us!' said the old woman. Her voice sounded dry and frightened. 'What do the bowseys think they're doin'?'

Nobody answered her. The other onlookers were as shocked as she was herself.