

The Plough and the Stars – Summary of Act 2

Setting:

It is an hour after the events at the end of Act 1

A large pub on the corner of the street. The barman is wiping the counter. A pretty young prostitute, Rosie Redmond, is standing at the counter with what remains of her glass of whiskey.

The barman asks Rosie if she has had much business that night and she replies that she has not as the men are all too caught up with the high ideals of their march to take any notice of a girl like herself at the moment. She remarks on the number of platforms – four – that have been prepared for the speakers at this large meeting and points out that one of the platforms is just opposite the pub window. The barman says that the position of that platform means that when the speaker arrives those in the bar will be able to see him clearly and hear everything he has to say.



Rosie complains that it is hard to make enough money on which to live when she has to pay for her keep in the brothel and, on top of that, is taxed a pound for every client she brings home for the night. She believes that if she could just save up enough for a nice outfit, things would go a lot better for her.

The barman tells her to be quiet as he wants to listen to what the speaker

outside the window is saying. He and Rosie look out the window and listen to the man whose silhouette can be seen through the window. The speaker says that it is a glorious thing to see Irishmen armed and ready to fight. He claims that Irish people must become used to seeing and using weapons and should not regard bloodshed as something dreadful but rather as something that cleans and sanctifies the nation. If the people cannot see the armed struggle this way, then the country has become weak and feeble. (*The speaker's words are taken from speeches made by Padraig Pearse.*)



Rosie agrees with what the speaker says and the barman says that if he were a younger man he'd be inspired to join the struggle for Irish independence.

Rosie spots Peter and Fluther running over to the pub for a drink. The two men rush into the pub, full of excitement and emotion as a result of having heard the speech. Peter orders two small measures of whiskey, saying that after a meeting like the one taking place right now he is so thirsty he could drink Loch Erinn dry. Fluther agrees with Peter, saying that any man would feel the same way when so keyed up to fight but aware at the same time that he might be facing death.

Peter is feeling very patriotic and says that he had a lump in his throat when he heard the band playing 'The Soldiers' Song'. (*This song is now our national anthem.*)

Fluther enthusiastically supports Peter's attitude, claiming that if Dublin men are sufficiently stirred up nothing and nobody can stand between them and their goals, unlike country men who would shy away from any confrontation



that would compromise their own safety. (*The word 'compromization' is an invented one meaning just this.*)

Peter, highly excited now, calls for two more drinks and says

that all the talk of the suffering of the Irish left him in an agitated state in which he was desperate to take action. (*Significantly, the only action he takes is to order more drinks, which is O'Casey's way of ridiculing the effects of these high-minded, idealistic speeches and the effect they have on the ordinary man.*)

Fluther and Peter are in perfect accord now and Fluther says that he too was deeply moved by patriotic fervour to the extent that thought of anything but Ireland's cause was driven from his mind. He feels that the speech has turned him into a brave man, ready for action.

At this moment, the speaker's silhouette appears again in the window as he begins to address the people. Peter is so overcome by his own enthusiasm that he fails to notice the speaker. Fluther has noticed him, however, and calls for Peter to be quiet so they can listen.

The Voice of the Man addresses his comrades in the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers (*a group formed in 1913, many of whom – including Pearse, their director of military operations – believed that force was necessary to overthrow the British in Ireland*). The speaker says that the blood of soldiers is essential in achieving a free Ireland and should be gladly given.

Fluther gulps down the rest of his drink and rushes outside, urging Peter to join him in the crowd listening to the speaker. Peter finishes his drink more slowly than Fluther but before he can leave the pub, The Covey enters. Peter adopts an air, which he believes is a nice blend of dignity and power and marches out of the bar.

The Covey asks the barman for a drink, saying sarcastically that he needs it to recover from the sight of seeing the ridiculous figure of Peter stalking out of the pub.

Rosie Redmond spots a potential customer in The Covey and moves to his side at the bar, telling the barman that The Covey has made it clear with a look that he wants to buy her a drink. The barman ignores her and brings The Covey his drink, which Rosie grabs. The barman tells her to hold on and stop what she is doing. Rosie will have none of it and insists that The Covey has an eye for her and wants to buy her a drink. She makes up a nickname for The Covey: 'Jiggs'. Rosie claims she can see into a man's thoughts. The Covey is uncomfortable with the direction the conversation is taking and moves away from Rosie, pulling his cap down to shield his eyes from her gaze.

Rosie is unabashed, following The Covey and trying to engage him in conversation about the meeting. Her aim is to please and she assumes that he

will be one of those who is in favour of the cause espoused by the speaker outside.

The Covey, rather ridiculously, attempts to engage Rosie in a Socialist conversation, asking her what use is political freedom compared to economic freedom. Rosie pretends to agree with him, asking the barman if he remembers her saying that very thing earlier in the evening. The barman, unwilling to be drawn in, says he doesn't remember.

The Covey continues in his attempt to convince this prostitute of the value of socialism and says he will leave a book on the subject in the bar for her the following night.

Rosie makes a final attempt to secure The Covey as a client, throwing off her shawl and exposing her low-cut top. She says it is a shame to see a young man focusing on anything but the legs and silk stockings of a pretty young girl. The Covey seems frightened, and once again moves away from Rosie. Rosie follows him and tries to entice him with talk of the delights of kissing and cuddling on a warm summer's evening.

The Covey is alarmed and asks Rosie what she thinks she is doing. He claims he has better things to be doing rather than chasing after women.

Rosie asks The Covey if he has ever held a girl's hand and whether he would know how to tickle a girl in a flirtatious manner.

The Covey runs out, saying he will have nothing to do with a woman like Rosie. She is furious, and says that men like him should confine themselves to monasteries where they could kneel in penitential prayer and strike their chest

as they prayed.

Outside, The Covey is heard mockingly calling 'Cuckoo!' It transpires that he is mocking Peter, who is coming back into the pub with Mrs Gogan and Fluther. Peter is angry with The Covey for taunting him by saying 'Cuckoo!' as he passed. Fluther is unimpressed and unsympathetic, saying that there is nothing particularly insulting in the word 'Cuckoo'. Peter, distressed and upset, says that it is not the word that offends him, but the way The Covey says it. Fluther is dismissive of Peter's concerns and turns to Mrs Gogan, politely asking her if she would like a drink. Mrs Gogan says she will have a whiskey, and Fluther calls for whiskey for the three of them.

As they drink, Mrs Gogan comments on the uniform worn by Peter and his comrades. (*The Irish National Foresters –founded in 1877 - were in favour of Irish nationalism but had never been involved in any military action.*) Mrs Gogan reflects on the ostrich feather, which adorns the hats of the members. As they walk, the ostrich feather bobs and dances and Mrs Gogan compares it to hanged men bobbing and dancing on the gallows as the Foresters will no doubt do if they continue to fight for Ireland. Fluther takes up her taunting of Peter, saying that if any of the Foresters die, it won't be for Ireland.

Peter is annoyed and asks if Mrs Gogan and Fluther are going to start tormenting him the way The Covey does. He, Peter, claims that he has made the annual pilgrimage to the grave of the great Irish patriot Wolfe Tone in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare every year for the last twenty-five years.

Fluther points out that despite Peter's boasting about this annual pilgrimage, he is not the only person to have made it on a regular basis. Peter's pride is injured and he says that he is not boasting at all but feels he must point out

that he has pulled a leaf from the foliage around Tone's grave each year and put it in his prayer book as a memento.

Fluther is scornful of this, pointing out that by putting the leaf from Wolfe Tone's grave into his prayer book, Peter is 'scabbing' or strike-breaking or being two-faced and hypocritical. The Catholic Church disapproved of men like Wolfe Tone who, because of his position as the father of Irish nationalism, was not a man of peace. Fluther mocks the Foresters' elaborate headgear, saying they are trying to outdo the saints with their haloes by wearing the equivalent of the aurora borealis around their heads. By this, Fluther means that the Foresters' hats are as flashy and eye-catching as the Northern Lights.

Fluther says he doesn't care if Peter spends all his days in Bodenstown, it won't impress him. Mrs Gogan tries to make the peace, saying she was only admiring the Foresters' uniform or, as she calls it, 'costume'. She says that the Foresters' uniform is at least a lot more decent than a kilt. Mrs Gogan thinks kilts are indecent. Fluther says that Peter's uniform is so ridiculous that you would be hard pushed to know whether it was making fun of him or he was making fun of it.

The barman, keen to keep the peace in his pub, tells them to calm down and speak nicely as he doesn't want any trouble.

The Covey and Bessie Burgess enter, taking their seats some way away from the other occupants of the bar. The Covey calls for two glasses of malt whiskey.



Peter is annoyed to see The Covey, claiming that the other man has followed him in.

Bessie pretends to be speaking to The Covey but she is really directing her words at the group at the other end of the bar. She wonders aloud how the fighting men can call themselves Catholics but at the same time do nothing to help poor little Catholic Belgium by fighting in World War One.

Mrs Gogan rises to the bait and asks loudly 'What about poor little Catholic Ireland?' Bessie tells Mrs Gogan to mind her own business and advises her to drink herself into insensibility so her foolishness won't show. Peter, seeming to sense that there might be a fight brewing between the two women, tells Mrs Gogan to ignore Bessie.

Bessie continues talking, saying that she is filled with anger when she thinks of the poor British soldiers – including her own son – who are shedding blood and dying for a good cause abroad. Mrs Gogan says it is hard to have to put up with Bessie's talk when she, Bessie, is a Protestant who thinks more highly of a glass of whiskey than she does of the blessed saints.

Fluther tries to calm Mrs Gogan, reminding her that Bessie is always at her most insulting when she's had a few drinks. He advises Mrs Gogan to ignore her and not give her the satisfaction of an argument. Bessie, he claims, is not completely sane.

Bessie is not deterred and continues to direct jibes and insults at Mrs Gogan. She says there is a type of woman who behaves shamefully and immorally by drinking with a group of men, particularly when this woman is not a young, fashionable girl who might be excused such behaviour but is a middle-aged,

married women. She says such a woman is loud and vulgar and should be at home in her own house.

The Covey joins Bessie in her insulting of the others by saying that it makes him sick to see certain old fools dressed up like toy soldiers. His remark is obviously directed at Peter, who rises to the bait and asks God to grant him the patience to ignore The Covey's remarks.

Mrs Gogan dips her finger in the whiskey and moistens the baby's lips with it. She says, to no-one in particular it seems, that she is a woman who has minded her own business for twenty-five years and always been friendly with her neighbours without being nosey, unlike some people she could mention who are never happy unless they're poking their nose into other people's affairs and judging them.

Before Bessie can reply to Mrs Gogan's comment, the Voice of the Speaker outside is heard again. He waxes lyrical about war, calling it both a terrible and a wonderful thing. He says Irish people fear war because they don't know anything about it but should welcome it the way they would welcome the Angel of God. He passes out of sight and hearing once more.

The Covey says that the speaker is misleading them all and that the only worthwhile war is the war for economic freedom for the working class.

Bessie now responds to Mrs Gogan's earlier remarks, saying that certain people – meaning Mrs Gogan - would be better of mending their ways instead of keeping an eye out for the Saint Vincent de Paul man in case he sees that all the society's donations are being spent in the pub. She implies that Mrs Gogan puts on an angelic face to deceive the Vincent de Paul man.

Mrs Gogan snaps back that certain women stand hidden behind their own doors, eavesdropping on their neighbours and being filled with envy at all the little things their neighbours have managed to get for themselves by working hard. *(She may be referring to Nora's house with her nice bits and pieces here, or her own.)*

Peter again urges Mrs Gogan to ignore Bessie, saying that a dignified silence would be the best response. God, he tells Mrs Gogan, will judge Bessie Burgess harshly when her time comes.



Bessie says she does not pretend to be knowledgeable as she is not a show off but what she does know she has learned over time, building up the information little bits at

a time. However, she states, although she may not know much, she does at least know her family background and is legitimate while there are others who wear a wedding ring but would be hard pressed to show their wedding licence if asked. She implies that Mrs Gogan has had her children out of wedlock.

Mrs Gogan flies into a wild rage when she hears this accusation and rushed out into the middle of the pub, challenging Bessie. Mrs Gogan calls Bessie a rotten liar and that she was lawfully married to her late husband for twenty years. All her children are legitimate and she has broken none of the Ten

Commandments for fear of going to hell. She claims that Bessie Burgess cannot say the same and that she has only half-hearted morals, which are abandoned at the first sign of temptation. She refers darkly to the 'sins of a night's diversion' but doesn't say outright what she suspects Bessie of doing on these nights when she gives in to temptation. Bessie, however, responds immediately to Mrs Gogan's attack jumping out and facing the other woman, clapping her hands together to emphasise her remarks. She says Mrs Gogan is a slanderer whose soul has withered up and also accuses Mrs Gogan of flirting with men.

At this point the barman intervenes and tells the two women to calm down, as he wants no fighting in his pub. Fluther joins him in trying to keep the peace and tells Mrs Gogan that she should not ruin a night like this which should be full of hope by fighting with her neighbour. Peter likewise begs Bessie to back off, claiming to be feeling unwell and likely to take a turn for the worse if he sees a fight. He advises Bessie to have a little respect for herself.

Neither woman is remotely calmed by the men's words. Bessie pushes Peter and sends him sprawling, yelling at him to leave her alone and calling him a little cowardly, weak fool. Mrs Gogan, for her part, screams at Fluther to let her go, swearing that she will not stand by and allow Bessie to spread vicious rumours about her. Bessie yells back at her that the best thing anyone could do for Mrs Gogan would be to hide the truth about her. Frantic with anger now, Mrs Gogan shouts for someone to take the baby she has been carrying since she came into the pub. When nobody steps forward, Mrs Gogan thrusts the infant into Peter's arms and squares up to Bessie, mocking her for her concern over poor little Catholic Belgium and telling her that she when she is finished with her Bessie will have a little leisure to lie down and think about her king and country.

The barman now comes out from behind the counter, steps between the two women and pushes them out the door, telling them that as they can't resolve their differences peacefully they will have to leave. He is worried about having another offence registered against his pub licence.

Peter is most unhappy at having the baby dumped on him and calls Mrs Gogan to take it back but it is too late. He bemoans his fate at having been picked to hold the child. Slyly, The Covey says that Mrs Gogan might have known exactly to whom she was giving the baby. The implication is that Peter is the infant's father. Peter is outraged and warns The Covey that he is getting sick of his jibes and jeers and will attack him for them one of these days.

The barman succeeds in shoving Mrs Gogan and Bessie out of the pub; Bessie still arguing with Mrs Gogan as the women are evicted.

Peter, dismayed, puts the baby down on the floor and runs to the door, calling Mrs Gogan to come back and take her child. She has gone, however, and Peter returns to the bar, wondering aloud what they are going to do with the infant. The Covey mockingly says they should take it outside and show everybody what Peter has found. In a panic, Peter asks Fluther to pick up the baby and run after Mrs Gogan, but Fluther refuses, saying he is not as big a fool as Peter. The barman orders Peter to take the child and follow Mrs Gogan before she has gone too far, saying he does not want the 'bloody thing' left in his bar. Peter, feeling very sorry for himself and complaining all the while about the hardships he has to endure, picks up the infant and goes out with it.

Fluther expresses his relief that the women have gone, saying there is nothing worse than women when they start to fight as it is almost impossible to stop them. He offers The Covey a drink and orders one for himself too. Fluther says

again that there is no controlling women who have lost their head.

Rosie Redmond returns and positions herself beside The Covey. She claims there is no use in trying to entice any men at the moment with all that is going on and says that business was never worse. She asks the barman for another half of whiskey on credit. He refuses, as she already owes him for three. Rosie indignantly says he will be paid but he seems doubtful. Fluther intervenes and offers to buy Rosie a drink. She is very pleased and claps him on the back, calling him an old sport.

Fluther says the meeting should be over soon and The Covey says the sooner the better, as it's all a lot of nonsense. Fluther disagrees and tells The Covey that he learned about the Sean Bhean Bhocht – the poor old woman who was a symbol of Ireland in distress – when he was only a little child at his mother's knee. The Covey is unimpressed and says that it's all rubbish fed to the workers by the bourgeoisie. Fluther is annoyed to hear that his childhood stories and Irish nationalism are rubbish. He shows The Covey a scar under his eye, which he says is a result of a wound caused by a mounted soldier's sword. He leans forward and asks Rosie to feel a hollow in his skull which is apparently the dent left by a policeman's baton when he, Fluther, was at a Labour meeting in the Phoenix Park. Rosie plays along with him but winks at The Covey behind Fluther's back. The Covey says the policeman must have hit Fluther by mistake as he can't imagine what involvement Fluther ever had with the Labour party. Annoyed, Fluther says that maybe he knows as much and has done as much for the Labour party as chancers who are always boasting about it. He clearly means The Covey when he says this.

The barman tells Fluther to calm down and The Covey agrees, saying there is no need to get excited about it. Fluther, thoroughly agitated now, shouts that

he is not getting excited and that it would take more than The Covey to wind him up. He says The Covey is all talk about the Labour movement but knows no more about it than anyone else, at the end of the day. The Covey challenges Fluther's knowledge then, asking him to explain the mechanism of exchange. Fluther, who feels he is beaten, roars that there's nothing about the mechanism of exchange in the Trade Union rules and therefore he shouldn't be expected to know about it.

The barman once again intervenes, asking Fluther to calm down. At the same time, however, The Covey continues to provoke Fluther, asking him this time what Karl Marx says about the Relation of Cost to the Value of Production. Fluther angrily asks why he should care and says he's an Irishman with more sense than to follow foreigners. (*Karl Marx was German.*)

The barman yet again warns Fluther to take it easy. The Covey says it is a waste of time talking to Fluther, ending his sentence with the socialist term 'comrade', as always. Fluther says he is not The Covey's comrade and would be in the last stages of desperation before he'd ever want The Covey for a comrade.

Rosie Redmond joins in now and tells The Covey that it seems ridiculous that a youngster like himself should be throwing around words he doesn't understand in an arrogant attempt to get the better of a mature man like Fluther who knows far more about the world than The Covey does. The Covey rounds on her savagely, saying he knows what she is and it will be a long time before he, The Covey, will take criticism or advice from a prostitute. Rosie is deeply humiliated and says he is less than a man to turn on a woman that way. She says she has feelings and that it was only a short while ago that The Covey was flirting with her and that he is angry with her now because she would have nothing to do with him. She says if she were a man or The Covey a

woman, she would beat the face off him.

Fluther steps in, saying that no woman in his company will be treated unfairly. He tells Rosie not to demean herself by talking to The Covey and he turns to the other man, saying that if he has anything to say, he can say it to Fluther, not Rosie as he will not have a lady in his company insulted.

The Covey is scornful of this act of gallantry and says he couldn't care less what woman Fluther is chasing but he won't stand by and see the Labour movement insulted. He says he will show Fluther up for what he really is. Fluther is enraged and says that he could beat up two of The Covey before breakfast. The Covey is contemptuous of this threat and mockingly asks Fluther where he has buried all the people he killed.

Fluther is in a high temper now and warns The Covey again to stop trying to talk down to him and to be more polite before he, Fluther, is forced to teach him manners. The Covey is unimpressed, sneering that Fluther thinks he's a big man. Fluther responds by tapping The Covey threateningly on the shoulder and telling him he is tempting fate when he tempts Fluther.

The Covey now loses his temper and shouts at Fluther, telling him to watch where he puts his hands as he's taking a big risk by touching The Covey. Fluther's response is to take off his hat and to stand in the middle of the pub, fists raised like a boxer. He roars at The Covey to come and fight him and he will soon find his opinion of Fluther changed.

The barman rushes out from behind the bar and grabs The Covey, beginning to shove him out of the bar. He says that Fluther is a friend of his and he'll not see him insulted by a little bully like The Covey. The Covey struggles to get free

and begs for one minute to sort Fluther out, which Fluther is more than happy to agree to but the barman ignores them both and pushes The Covey out on to the street.

Rosie gets Fluther's hat for him and says admiringly that he sorted The Covey out properly. She claims that there are few men of Fluther's calibre left nowadays. Fluther is proud and says he was not going to stand by and let The Covey speak the way he was. He tells Rosie that The Covey got off lightly as when he, Fluther, hit a man last week he hit him so hard that the fellow is still falling. Rosie says that if Fluther had landed one blow on The Covey he would have broken him in half. Fluther is delighted with this and puts his arm lovingly around Rosie, calling her his little darling and inviting her into a quiet snug so they can have a few drinks before he sees her home. It seems that Rosie has found a customer at last. She flirtatiously tells Fluther that he's a terrible man for women and they go into the snug together.



Jack Clitheroe, Captain Brennan and Lieut. Langon of the Irish Volunteers enter the bar hurriedly. Captain Brennan carries the banner of The Plough and the Stars, and Lieut. Langon the green, white and orange Tricolour. Their faces are flushed red, they speak rapidly and their eyes sparkle. They are clearly emotional as a result of the speech they have heard outside.

Jack Clitheroe calls for three glasses of port. As they drink, Capt. Brennan says

they won't have long to wait now and Lieut. Langon agrees, saying the country is more than ready for revolution. They agree that Ireland is more important than any of their wives or mothers. As Lieut. Langon says that the time and place for revolution is here and now, the speaker outside the window appears in silhouette once again. The three men stop and listen.



The Voice of the Man echoes much of the famous final lines of Padraig Pearse's speech at the graveside of O'Donovan Rossa. He says that Ireland's enemies are strong but that the Irish men of the past have sown the seeds of rebellion in the hearts of the young men of this generation and now

those seeds have grown and ripened. He says that the British believe they have pacified Ireland but all they have done by killing the revolutionaries of the past is to fuel the desire for freedom in the revolutionaries of the present.

Much inspired by this speech, Brennan, Langon and Clitheroe vow to suffer imprisonment, injury and death for Ireland's freedom, if that is what it takes.

They drink their ports and when a bugle sounds outside, rush out.

There is a brief pause and then Rosie and Fluther come out of the snug together. They are in great form and Rosie is linking her arm into Fluther's. He is slightly drunk.

Rosie asks Fluther if he is afraid to come home with her and he replies that of course he is not. Rosie is pleased and they head off together.

Outside, an officer's voice is heard as he gives the order for the Irish Volunteers to march.

Rosie puts her arm around Fluther and begins singing. They leave the pub.

Jack Clitheroe's voice is heard outside, ordering the Dublin Battalion of the Irish Citizen Army to march.

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