

The Plough and the Stars – Act 4 - Summary

It is a few days after the action of Scene 3.

The setting is Bessie Burgess' attic room in the tenement house. It is a poor, dark room and the only light is from the fire and the two candles burning beside a coffin propped up on two chairs.

It is dark, and through the window the burning buildings in the town can be seen. Peter and The Covey are sitting on the floor playing cards and Fluther is kneeling by the window, looking out.

Fluther says the sky is so red that half the city must be on fire. The Covey tells Fluther that it is dangerous to stay by the window for two reasons: he might be shot and he might draw the British soldiers' attention to the house if he is seen. Peter agrees, reminding Fluther that they had to leave their own rooms on the floors below because they were being riddled with machine-gun fire. He says that if Fluther keeps peeping out they will be forced to leave this place too. Fluther responds by telling Peter that if the British attack Peter can go out in his uniform and the British forces will flee before him the way the Vikings fled before Brian Boru.

The Covey has shuffled the cards and calls Fluther to come and cut them. The Covey deals and says that spades are trumps.

From the bedroom to the left, Nora is heard moaning. Fluther remarks that she has been quiet for a while up to this point. The Covey says that she has had periods of quietness before but has followed them by making more noise than ever. In the same breath, he asks which card led this time and Peter says it was

the Three of Hearts. Fluther muses that it is hard to think of Nora's still-born



baby lying in the same coffin of poor little Mollser who died suddenly in the end. The Covey says it was no surprise Mollser died the way she did as she never had any proper care because her mother was forced to go out night and day looking for work after Mollser's father died of consumption (TB) before their last baby was born.

Outside a voice is heard calling 'Red Cross! Ambulance!'

The men continue playing cards and Fluther wonders if Nora will ever be the same after her baby's death. The Covey says that the doctor thinks she won't be and that she has gone a little mad. He says that Nora is rambling a lot and imagining that she is out for a walk in the country with Jack or at home getting his dinner ready. Sometimes she calls for her dead baby. The Covey wonders if the hallucinations may be attributed to the chloroform Nora was given. He says that they couldn't have coped without Bessie, who has been sitting up with Nora for three nights in a row. Fluther says he always knew Bessie was a good sort. Immediately after saying this, he begins arguing with Peter about the card game they are playing. Their voices are raised and that brings Bessie to the door. She tells them that Nora has finally fallen asleep and threatens them with physical harm if they wake her. The men become quieter and Peter says that God will stand in judgement on Fluther and The Covey for their treatment of him.

Fluther takes a drink from a bottle of whiskey in his pocket and The Covey advises him to keep some of it for the following day. Fluther is scornful of this

suggestion, pointing out that they may be dead tomorrow.

Bessie begins talking about Nora, saying that she left her sleeping quietly but that she has no great hope of her recovery. She says that Nora seems to have lost her mind and to be living in the past. As she talks, the exhausted Bessie nods off a little before starting up as she imagines she hears Nora calling her.

The Covey says that Nora might sleep for a long time, but his attention is clearly more directed to the card game than the ailing woman, as is Fluther's.

Suddenly, The Covey hears the sound of approaching footsteps.

There is a pause and then Captain Brennan enters the room. He is out of uniform and back in his ordinary clothes now. He is exhausted, pale and grimy. He leans heavily on a chair as he asks where he can find Mrs Clitheroe. Bessie asks what he wants with Nora and Brennan says he has a last message from her husband who was killed in the Imperial hotel. Jack was shot through the arm and the lung; the hotel caught fire and then Brennan had to leave him to save himself, stopping only to say a quick prayer for the dying and leave a set of Rosary beads entwined around Jack's fingers. Brennan shows Bessie the bullet holes in his coat and says he got those as he dashed for safety. He saw the Plough and the Stars flag fall just as the burning roof of the hotel caved in on the spot where Jack had been.

Bessie is angry and contemptuous, saying that Brennan ran like a hare rather than helping Jack. Brennan replies that he took risks just like Jack and that Jack faced death like a man. Jack asked Brennan to tell Nora to be brave as he was ready to meet his maker and to die for Ireland. Brennan says that when Pearse heard that he said that Jack's death was a glorious one. Brennan believes that

Nora's grief will turn to joy when she realises that her husband died a hero. Bessie says that if Brennan had seen Nora he'd know that she would never think that way.

Nora enters. She is in her nightdress and her hair hangs down around her pale face. She is fidgeting nervously with her nightdress and does not seem to see the people in the room as she comes in. Nora's mind is wandering and she seems to believe she is off on a walk in the country with Jack. She comments on the birds they see but at the same time becomes anxious that Jack is leaving her and going some place she cannot follow. She becomes increasingly agitated, calling Jack's name in fear and distress.

Gessie goes over to Nora and takes hold of her arm, scolding her gently for getting out of bed. She says Nora will get cold if she stays up in such light clothes. Nora says she does feel cold and then has a moment of startled and frightened awareness as she looks around the room and wonders where she is. Bessie reassures her that she is among friends and asks if she recognises her Uncle Peter and Fluther.

Peter begins to move towards Nora, speaking to her affectionately but Fluther pulls him back and says they should leave her in the care of Bessie as a crowd might upset Nora.

Nora says that there is something she should remember but she can't think of it. She becomes increasingly upset and breaks away from Bessie, running over to the men and grabbing Fluther. She asks where they have hidden her baby and screams that she doesn't know what's wrong but that she wants her husband.

Bessie is deeply sorry for Nora but Nora fights Bessie's attempts to restrain her, screaming that she will go nowhere until they give her back her husband and accusing them all of being murderers. Bessie does her best to calm Nora, saying that they will bring her husband to her if she lies down quietly. She tries to bring Nora back to the bedroom, promising to sing to her if she goes with her.

Nora is bewildered and terrified. She panics, begging Bessie not to leave her and to hold her tight.

Fluther tells Brennan that he can see now how things are with Nora and the shocked Brennan makes no reply. Peter wonders what state Nora would be in if she heard that Jack was dead and The Covey turns on him, telling him to shut up.

Bessie talks soothingly to Nora, telling her they have to be brave and that patience will help them to endure the long hours of grief. She tries to lift Nora's spirits and tells her that she will sing her to sleep.

Nora, who has been walking towards the bedroom, stops suddenly and says that she and Jack are going out that night but she can't remember where. She switches suddenly to the topic of their baby and seems to believe she is still pregnant. She says that if the baby is a girl they will call it Maura but then becomes hysterical again, screaming for Jack and claiming that he is just there but 'they' won't give him back to her. Bessie speaks soothingly to her and says that Nora must be quiet if she wants Bessie to sing to her. Nora clings to Bessie and begs her to hold her hand and to sing to her. Bessie leads Nora into the bedroom to lie down and promises to sing to her when she is in bed. Nora forcefully commands Bessie to sing to her and Bessie obliges by breaking into a

hymn as she leads Nora offstage. The hymn chosen, 'Lead Kindly Light' has a history of being sung in the darkest hours.

The Covey turns to Brennan and says that now that he has seen Nora he supposes there will be no more talk of telling her what has happened until she is better. He advises Brennan to leave and go back to where he came from. Brennan replies that he cannot, as the British soldiers are everywhere. He claims a fly couldn't sneak past them and says he only managed to get to safety in the tenement house because he changed out of his uniform and into civilian clothes. The Covey is frightened that if Brennan is found with them they will be implicated in the fighting and tells Brennan that he is not in a safe place, whatever he may think. Peter is equally shocked at the prospect of the British finding a serving Volunteer with them and thus assuming they are all guilty. The Covey says they have been through enough already without that.

Fluther tells them to be quiet as he thinks he hears British soldiers coming up the stairs. He tells the others to resume their card game and act as if there is nothing wrong.



A British soldier, Corporal Stoddart enters. He asks irreverently if the coffin contains 'the stiff', and it becomes clear that he has been sent to escort the coffin to the graveyard. The

Covey answers with a quick 'Yis' and Corporal Stoddart asks who will be accompanying the coffin as only one mourner is allowed. The Covey says he



doesn't know and Corporal Stoddart is bewildered by this answer.

Just then Bessie comes into the room and says that Nora has finally fallen asleep. She sees Corporal Stoddart and

asks if he has come to take poor Mollser away. Corporal Stoddart says he has and asks again who is going to accompany the coffin to the graveyard. Bessie says that Mrs Gogan, Mollser's mother, will go with her daughter to her final resting place and says that Mollser's death has been a terrible blow to her poor mother. Fluther disagrees, saying that Mrs Gogan is so obsessed with death that she would regard a death in the family as an honour of sorts.

Bessie sinks into a chair by the fire, declaring that she is exhausted.

Corporal Stoddart asks if Mollser was shot dead but The Covey says that she died of consumption. Corporal Stoddart dismissively asks if that is all that killed her and says again he thought she might have been shot. The Covey is furious, asking Stoddart if he knows that consumption has killed more people than the war has done. He blames the system of government under which they live. Stoddart readily agrees, saying he is a Socialist too but has to do his duty in times of war. The Covey angrily says that the only 'duty' of a Socialist is to help the working men to economic freedom. Corporal Stoddart maintains

that a man has to fight for his country. Fluther joins the fray now, asking Stoddart if he is fighting for his country now. Peter is unhappy and nervous at the turn the conversation is taking and asks Fluther to calm down. The Covey ignores him and asks Stoddart if he has read Jenersky's *Thesis on the Origin, Development, and Consolidation of the Evolutionary Idea of the Proletariat*. Stoddart is unimpressed and tells The Covey to be quiet.

Bessie stirs now and sleepily asks Stoddart how things are in town. He replies that it s almost over and that the British forces have the rebels surrounded. He describes the rebellion as little more than a dog-fight.

The sharp ping of a sniper's rifle is clearly heard at this moment, followed by the sound of the Red Cross ambulance passing by. Corporal Stoddart angrily curses the sniper who is picking off their men and says that when he is caught he will be shown no mercy.

Mrs Gogan enters. She is tearful at Mollser's death but also a little proud to be the most important mourner at this occasion. She tells Fluther that she will never forget all he did for her by risking life and limb to go out and get the undertaker and arrange the funeral. She says that Mollser will pray for him in heaven.

Corporal Stoddart is impatient and wants to get on with escorting the coffin off the premises as soon as possible.

Bessie speaks most politely to Mrs Gogan, asking her to excuse her for not standing up as the coffin is being carried out. She explains that she is shaky on her legs from exhaustion after sitting up with Nora and that she intends no disrespect to poor Mollser. Fluther says that he knows full well that Bessie

intends no disrespect, quite the opposite in fact. Mrs Gogan speaks most warmly to Bessie, saying that she knows all the little acts of kindness Bessie was responsible for, from slipping Mollser food and drink when possible to lifting her spirits with a gentle word.

Corporal Stoddart is still impatient to go but he is not unkind as he tells Mrs Gogan to hurry up.



The Covey, Fluther, Brennan and Peter carry out the coffin, followed by Mrs Gogan. When they have gone, Corporal Stoddart asks the dozing Bessie how many men are in the house. Bessie wakes with a start and says that Corporal Stoddart saw all the men there were. He asks if there are any

more in the house and Bessie says there may be, downstairs. She asks why he wants to know and Stoddart tells her that all the men in the district are to be rounded up as someone is helping and sheltering the snipers. He says he if had his way, he'd make all the men join the army to fight in the war. He supposes that Bessie doesn't agree with him as she is probably, like them a 'Shinner' or Sinn Féin Republican. Bessie is outraged and flies fully awake, telling him that she is a loyal British subject whose only son went to fight for King and country in the war and who is now on his way home from the front with a shattered arm. She sinks forward into sleep again.

Peter marches back into the room, stiffly indignant. He paces back and forth,

clearly repressing a violent desire to speak angrily. The Covey, Fluther and Brennan follow him in. Brennan slinks off into a corner, keen to avoid the soldier's gaze.

There is an embarrassed pause and then Fluther says that the fighting outside on the street is fierce and that it must be even worse in O'Connell Street.

Corporal Stoddart assures him that the rebels will soon surrender as the British forces have them surrounded and are firing at them from all sides.

In what seems like a completely irrelevant change of topic from the serious to the ridiculous, Peter finally explodes and shouts at Fluther and The Covey that he is less like an undertaker than either of them is and he accuses them of making fun of him while he was helping to carry the coffin from the house. The Covey tells him to shut up but Peter will not be silenced, saying that all he is a peaceful man but that fools like Fluther and The Covey are always trying to aggravate him. Corporal Stoddart is astonished and bewildered by this sudden outburst and asks Peter what is wrong with him and what the others have done to upset him so. He addresses Peter as 'Daddy', showing the age difference between Peter and the younger men. Peter, forgetting his fear in his outrage, turns on Stoddart and savagely tells him to mind his own business.

Bessie rouses a little from her slumber and asks the men to keep the noise down or they will wake Nora again. She falls back asleep as soon as she has said this.

Fluther tells the others to start the card game again but Stoddart says there is no point as they will be leaving the moment the Sergeant arrives. Fluther is confused and asks why they will be leaving. Stoddart informs him that all the

men in the district are to be rounded up and held until what he dismissively refers to as 'the scrap' is over. Fluther asks where they will be held and Stoddart says they will be put in a church. Fluther asks if it will be a Protestant church and Stoddart says he doesn't know but supposes so. Fluther is dismayed and does not look forward to having to spend a night in a Protestant church. Stoddart says that they could bring the cards and maybe have a game or two while they wait. Fluther is initially appalled at the thought of playing cards in church but then reflects that if it is a Protestant church it is not really disrespectful to play cards there. Stoddart also advises them to bring a snack as they might be there for some time. He breaks into song, beginning to sing a ridiculous little ditty about liking a nice mince pie, but is brought up short when a rifle shot is heard outside, followed by a scream of pain. Stoddart pales and raises his own rifle, ready for action.



Outside, there is the sound of the Red Cross ambulance. Sergeant Tinley enters the room, pale, agitated and fiercely angry. Corporal Stoddart asks him if the rifle shot they heard was a rebel sniper shooting one of their men and Sergeant Tinley says it was. He says that Private Taylor was shot through the chest with a bullet so powerful that it left a fist-sized hole in his front and blew his back away completely. He says that the snipers are nothing more than assassins as they are using dum-dum bullets (bullets which are designed to mushroom on entering a target in order to cause maximum tissue damage). He says that the snipers are not playing fair by refusing to come into the open and fight. At this, Fluther (who in Act 3 accused the British of not fighting fair) speaks up and indignantly asks Tinley if he thinks that the poorly-trained and poorly-armed rebels facing an army with hundreds of thousand of trained foot,

cavalry and artillery soldiers is fair. Tinley ignores him and asks Stoddart if these four men are the only ones on the premises. Stoddart confirms this and Tinley orders them all to leave, saying that if the sniper shoots another of his men he will shoot one of them in retaliation. He grabs Fluther by the shoulder and roughly shoves him out towards the street, ignoring his protest at this treatment. Fluther shows another flash of courage here, saying to the armed and angry Tinley that if he and Stoddart laid down their guns he would beat them both in a fair fight without breaking a sweat. Tinley and Stoddart escort the four men from the room at gunpoint, leaving Bessie asleep on the chair and Nora in the bedroom.

The only people left in Bessie's home are Bessie, asleep in her chair, and Nora. Nora appears now at the bedroom door and walks into the living room. She looks around her vaguely, then moves to the fire and puts on the kettle. In a pathetic parody of her actions in the first scene, she begins to lay the table with the soiled cloths from Bessie's cupboard and to place cutlery and ware on the table. As she does so, Nora says that the room she is in seems odd and not like her own room somehow. She busies herself with preparations for Jack's tea and sings as she does so. The song she murmurs to herself is the one Jack used to sing to her when they were courting and in love. It is 'Nora', the song in which a man reminds his loved one of the first time they declared undying love for one another in the beauty and peace of the countryside. The contrast between the idyllic situation described in the song and the reality of Nora's life is heart-breaking.



As Nora puzzles over the strangeness of the room and continues to lay the table while singing to herself, a burst of rifle fire followed by machine gun fire is

heard in a nearby street. The sound of gunfire startles Nora from her reverie and she screams for Jack and for her baby. Bessie wakes on hearing her and rises to guide Nora back to bed.

Nora runs to the window and screams for Jack. Outside, soldiers shout at her to get away from the window. It is obvious that they regard any figure at a window as a potential sniper. Bessie seizes Nora and tries to take her away from the window. Nora fights with her, calling for Jack and her baby. Bessie begs her to come away but Nora accuses her of trying to keep her from her husband and will not move. Bessie tries to calm Nora by promising to bring Jack to her if only she will calm down.

With a great effort, Bessie pushes Nora from the window but as she does so she falls against the window herself. Instantly two rifle shots ring out in quick succession. Bessie has been shot and she staggers forward in agony, leaning heavily on the table with her hands. She screams that she has been shot and shouts at Nora that is her fault. She says Nora wouldn't be quiet and now this is the result. She calls for Mrs Gogan or Fluther or anybody to fetch her a doctor.



Bessie staggers forward towards the door in search of help but falls to her knees before she can get there. Nora is standing rigidly with her back to the wall as she stares at Bessie.

Nora calls for Jack in a terrified whisper and says she is frightened.

Bessie moans that this is the thanks she gets for looking after Nora day and



night. She asks for a drink of water and pleads with Nora to run to the door to call for help. When Nora does not move, Bessie curses her and says if she does not get help soon, she will die. Nora ignores her, calling for Jack.

Bessie slumps to the floor and she says her sight is going and that everything is turning to darkness. She knows she is dying and in her last moments she sings a hymn about Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. She falls quiet and lies still.

Mrs Gogan enters and sees Nora standing by the wall in shock. She asks what has happened but then sees Bessie's body on the floor and runs over to her. She shakes Bessie but realises when she touches her that she is cold. She cries out that the British soldiers have murdered a poor, inoffensive woman.

Sergeant Tinley and Corporal Stoddart enter in an agitated state, holding their rifles at the ready. Tinley shouts that this is the house and the window they were looking for. He clearly believes that they have found a sniper's hiding place.

Nora, still standing against the wall, calls for Bessie's body to be covered up.

Sergeant Tinley spots Bessie's body and says in some dismay that they have shot one of the women in the house. Corporal Stoddart asks what Bessie was doing, standing in front of the window at a time like this. He asks if she is dead and Sergeant Tinley says she is. He has recovered his composure now and says they couldn't afford to take any chances, implying they were right to shoot at the figure at the window.

Nora continues to scream to be taken away and for the body to be hidden.

Mrs Gogan returns with a sheet, which she places over Bessie's body, remarking as she does so that Bessie's corpse is already turning pale and waxy and that her face is locked in an expression of shock and agony. She goes over to Nora who is whimpering now as she begs to be taken away rather than have to stay in the room looking at Bessie's corpse. Mrs Gogan goes to her and tells her that



she can sleep in Mollser's bed while she gathers some neighbours to give Bessie a proper wake.

Corporal Stoddart notices that tea has been made and offers some to Sergeant Tinley, who accepts.

They sit and drink their tea as the city burns in the distance and gunfire rages. Tinley says that the increased gunfire means that the GPO is being attacked. In the background, the Red Cross ambulance passes.

Out at the barricades, men break into the WWI song 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. Tinley and Stoddart, sipping their tea, join in the chorus.