



***DARRELL  
FIGGIS***

***A CHRONICLE  
OF JAILS***

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# **A Chronicle of Jails**

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Tuesday, April 25th, 1916, was filled with sunshine, in token of the summer that was on the way, while a keen wind from the north came in reminder of the winter that was passing. The winter had been bad, and the spring but poor, so that work on the land was delayed, and there had been no fishing for the year. Yet these things had not served me ill, for I had been tied all hours with a book overdue with the publisher. For some months I had been struggling with Calendars of State Papers, in which in their introductions English editors revealed so candidly the prejudice that marked their work. So that I waited about the house during the morning, loth to begin work, and listening to the voices that came up from the land. The spring work was in full swing. Voices of men, voices of women, and the barking of dogs, flowed over the land pleasantly. Nothing seemed further removed from the day and its work than the noise of war.

Moreover, the post was late. This was another excuse for keeping from the desk. I looked along the half mile of the road till it bent behind the heath, looking for the rider on the horse that was our only connection with the big world.

It was not till some hours after noon that, looking along the road for the post that was so unaccountably late, I saw a friend making her way toward the house on her bicycle. As she came nearer and dismounted I could see the traces of tears on her cheeks, and wondered.

“The post is very late,” I said.

“There is no post,” she replied, “but there’s terrible news. There has been fighting in Dublin. They say Dawson Street is full of dead and wounded men. The Volunteers hold the General Post Office, the Bank of Ireland, and a number of buildings all over Dublin. They’ve been attacking the Castle, but I cannot find out what happened there. The soldiers are attacking them everywhere with machine guns, and they say the slaughter is terrible.”

The mountains stood in the sunshine, calm and splendid, with a delicate mist clothing their dark sides softly. The sea stretched out to the western horizon, its winter rage laid by, the sun glinting in the waves of the offshore wind like the spears of a countless host, and the islands of the bay, from Clare to Inish Bofin, lay in its waters like wonderful jewels that shone in the sun. Into this world of delicate beauty came this news, this tale of yet another attempt to win for a land so beautiful the freedom that other lands knew. It was not strange that the mind found some difficulty in adjusting itself to perceive a tale that came like a stream of blood across the day.

A week or so before, I had had a letter from Sheehy Skeffington telling me that the situation in Dublin was very strained. The constraint of the Censor was over the letter, and so little news was told. One knew, of course, that Dublin Castle was only looking for a chance to seize the Volunteer leaders, and one knew that the Volunteers were stiff and pledged to the utmost resistance. And Sheehy Skeffington’s letter conveyed little more than that the situation was daily becoming more and more strained.

I turned for more news.

“Oh, I don’t know any more,” came the response. “The engine-driver of the Mail brought whatever news there is. He said that the Volunteers held most of the railway stations, and that the bridges were blown up and the tracks destroyed. Fighting was going on throughout the city when he left. That’s what he says anyway, but nobody knows what to believe. It’s terrible to think of. The whole country was coming round to our way of thinking, business men and responsible men everywhere were waking up with your financial agitation and other things; and now it’s all spoilt. Everything will be worse than ever now.”

Already the news was spreading about the place, and knots of men were standing on the road in discussion. It was impossible to rest in the house, and so we set off through the villages to see if any further news could be learned. In one of the villages a Sunday’s paper was discovered, in which appeared the General Order by Eoin MacNeill, as President and Chief of Staff of the Volunteers, countermanding manœuvres that had been ordered for Sunday—Easter Sunday. That only complicated the matter. “Owing to the very critical position”—what critical position? What was the cause of the order? And if “each individual Volunteer” had been ordered to refrain from “parades, marches, or other movements,” how then came it about that there should be this news of fighting? The original manœuvres, apparently, had been ordered for Sunday, whereas this news told of trouble that had broken out on Monday.

It was perplexing. The only thesis into which all the available parts seemed to fit was that it was discovered that

Dublin Castle proposed to take advantage of the manœuvres on Easter Sunday to disarm the Volunteers, and, finding itself balked by this countermanding order, had attacked headquarters and the local centres on the following day. That tallied with Sheehy Skeffington's letter, and was also all of a piece with the document which Alderman Kelly had read at a meeting of the Dublin Corporation some days previous. And that was accepted by us all as the most likely theory to account for the facts.

It was a strange day. It was a strange week. If one's countrymen were being attacked, pretty plain and clear one's duty seemed; but how to put it into operation? Over eighteen months before—after the gun-running at Howth—I had been in command of the Volunteers for the county, and at the time of the split I had sought to hold both sides together in the county.

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Since then I had held to my desk.

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Whereas once there had been five thousand Volunteers in the county, now two hundred exceeded their number.

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The days were full of anxiety. A few of the older people, in secure possession of their pensions, cursed the "Sinn Feiners" roundly. But most were perplexed, and told one another tales of those who in elder days had died for Ireland. There was little else to tell. The air was thick with rumours: rumours that were contradicted as soon as they came. It was said that Cork and Limerick were "up," and

that Kerry had seized the cable and wireless stations. This was contradicted; and affirmed again. Wexford, it was said, was "up," and the whole county in a blaze. Hard on this followed news that Drogheda and Dundalk had risen and tried to destroy the railroads leading to the north. This last was the only exact piece of news that came from the east coast. More precise news came from Co. Galway, nearer home. The east coast news did not reach us till Wednesday and Thursday; but on Tuesday came news that Co. Galway was "up," and that the Volunteers there were under the command of Liam Mellows, who had returned from exile in England, disguised as a priest, and Kenny, a famous footballer. It was stated that they had marched on the city of Galway, but had retired from there under the fire of gunboats, and had turned on Athenry, where they had encamped on one of the Department's farms. Thursday and Friday reported that this force had marched on Athlone and had destroyed the bridge there; but that they were under retreat before a strong force of military with artillery.

This was the only piece of news that attempted to give details. Of Dublin no details could be learned, except that on the Monday Lancers had charged down O'Connell Street, but had broken in disorder under a heavy fire and had fled, leaving many slain. It was not till Thursday that the news of the taking of the Bank of Ireland was contradicted; and at the same time it was reported that Dublin Castle was not taken. Buildings such as Boland's Mill, Jacob's Factory, and the Four Courts, were said to be in possession of the Volunteers, who were resisting desperately; but these



names were not mentioned with any touch of authenticity, but rather like the names and symbols of a fantastic legend.

It was difficult to know what to believe or know. Each succeeding day, instead of clearing the air with more precise news, thickened the rumours that flew, until even what finally transpired to be true seemed to possess the least likelihood of truth. The police posted reassuring bulletins on the telegraph poles, but nobody gave any heed to these. They were read, and turned from in silent, deep distrust. From them first came the news that Sir Roger Casement had attempted to land on the coast of Kerry with rifles from a German transport, but that he had been arrested on landing in a small boat, and that the transport with rifles had been sunk. "German help is now at the bottom of the sea," declared the notice. Nobody believed any particle of the notice. The fact that a few of the old-age pensioners clutched the news to themselves so avidly only deepened the distrust.

From the coastguards on Wednesday news was circulated that the German Navy had attacked in force on the East Coast of England, in the attempt to effect a landing for troops; but that all the German fleet was sunk and the English fleet had lost two battleships. One of the coastguards' wives, however, the following day was heard to state that not two, but eight battleships had been sunk on the English side; and this spread swiftly through the villages. Little comment was made on the change in the story; and that fact was more significant than many words.

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