

# Happy Harpies

MIRIAM BURKE

Helena Molony stood proudly on the cobbled stones outside Liberty Hall with four hundred women and men, waiting for the revolution to begin. She was wearing a Sam Browne belt with a pistol over her lavender cardigan and grey tweed skirt; the women were wearing civilian clothes so they could carry despatches without arousing suspicion. She hadn't slept and her body vibrated like a plucked string when a man standing near her shouted a greeting to a friend. She was disappointed not to be going with James Connolly and the other leaders to the GPO but pleased she was assigned to the detachment headed by her friend and fellow Abbey actor, Captain Séan Connolly. When Séan told her they were going to take Dublin Castle, the centre of British power for seven hundred years, she was thrilled at the daringness of it.

Helena stood at the head of nine young women, all armed with pistols. They wore knapsacks packed with food provisions and first aid kits. The women stood behind a group of twenty men, with Séan Connolly at the front. The men were armed with rifles and some were in military uniform and others wore whatever green clothes they could find or borrow. They couldn't keep their limbs still; they moved their rifles from one side to another, they adjusted their ammunition belts, they changed the tilt of their hats. The men and women of the Irish Citizen Army knew they were about to play their part in the great drama of Irish history.

At last, the order to march was given by Commandant James Connolly and the detachments set off in different directions to carry out their missions. Séan led his men and women across the

steel swivel bridge that took them over the Liffey into Burgh Quay. The Corn Exchange looked alert in the spring sunshine, as if it was paying close attention to the unfolding drama. When they reached Westmoreland Street, they had to pass through crowds who had come out to feel the sun on their faces that Easter Monday. The citizens of Dublin stared at the little group of armed men and women with mild curiosity, some of them recognised Séan Connolly and Helena Molony from Abbey productions and assumed the group were rehearsing a play. No one felt fearful because men and women in rebel uniforms had been marching around the streets of Dublin for months. And James Connolly had been posting messages on a blackboard outside Liberty Hall every evening saying there would be an attack on this or that area of the city the following day.

When Captain Séan Connolly's detachment was walking along College Green, Helena heard a man in front of her whisper to his friend: 'We'll be slaughtered, Tony.'

'And it'll be our privilege,' she shouted at him.

He smiled at her and said: 'That's why I'm here.' He meant it and Helena felt guilty for shouting at him.

At the end of Dame Street, they turned left into Cork Hill, and walked across the cobbled stones towards the grey stone arch that provided a gated entrance to Dublin Castle. The 18th-century red brick buildings on either side of the gate were symbols of foreign rule. An unarmed policeman, Constable James O'Brien, was standing in front of the entrance to The Castle, and an armed soldier stood in a sentry box behind the open gate. Constable O'Brien was surprised when he saw Séan Connolly leading his group towards the arch; he had assumed they were out on a drilling exercise, and he expected them to carry on towards Lord Edward Street. When Séan reached the stone arch, he tried to go through the gate and Constable O'Brien put out an arm to stop him. Séan quickly lifted his pistol and shot James O'Brien in the head. The Constable fell to the ground and the rebels gathered around him, staring at the mess of blood and brain tissue on the side of his head. They had never seen a bullet wound. Séan shouted: 'Get in, get in. For God's sake, get in.' He was nodding at the entrance to The Castle. But they were too late; the soldier in the sentry box had closed the gate. They had lost their chance to take The Castle.

'Retreat to City Hall,' shouted Séan. 'Follow me. Quick. Run for it, run.' The soldier was shooting at them from behind the locked gate.

Helena ran after the others, weighed down by her pistol, her ammunition and the heavy knapsack.

The side entrance to City Hall was only a few feet from the gate to The Castle and Séan had a key because he worked there as a clerk. They took shelter behind the four grey stone columns in the portico while Séan struggled to fit the key in the lock; he couldn't stop his hands shaking. Helena wanted to help him but she held back.

The rebels stood for a few seconds in the great Rotunda, stunned by the ornately decorated dome, the twelve majestic fluted columns and the polished white and black marble floor.

'I want some men to guard the doors and the rest of us will shoot at The Castle from the roof. The women will set up the first aid station and take the provisions to the kitchen,' shouted Séan. The building was for him a prison where he had been trapped in a demeaning job.

When the women were walking towards the wide stone stairs, Jinny Shanahan turned to Helena Molony and whispered: 'What does that mean?' She was nodding at a mosaic on the floor with the embedded words *Obedientia Civium Urbis Felicitas*.

Helena looked at the inscription and laughed. 'It says: Happy the City Where Citizens Obey.'

'Happy The City Where the Citizens Are Free,' said Jinny.

'We'll have it changed,' said Helena. 'We'll change everything.'

Jinny looked up at the gold leaf in the ceiling and said: 'I've never seen anything so beautiful.'

'We'll turn it into flats,' said Helena.

Jinny laughed and followed her up the stairs.

The women set to work making roast beef sandwiches and tea in the kitchen.

'I can't stop thinking about the policeman,' said Jinny. She and Helena were standing next to each other buttering bread.

'I know,' said Helena.

'I recognised him - he lived in Stoneybatter. He was a Limerick man. He wasn't armed, was he?'

‘Think of what they did to us during the Lock-Out,’ said Helena. ‘And remember the people killed on Bachelors Walk.’

‘You’re right. It’s just that I’ve never seen a person die like that before. I wanted to say an Act of Contrition in his ear but it was too dangerous. Maybe we should say one now; it might still count.’

‘Yes,’ said Helena. ‘You lead us.’

‘O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest my sins above every other evil...’

When they’d finished praying, they continued their work in silence.

The young rebel guarding the front door of City Hall heard a loud banging on the door.

‘Who’s there?’ he asked, with his rifle cocked. He pictured an entire regiment of the British Army on the other side. He was afraid his legs were going to buckle.

‘It’s Kathleen Lynn.’

The young man unlocked the door and Kathleen Lynn entered the building, carrying a medical bag. Kathleen wore her dark hair in braids across the top of her head and she had round wire spectacles. She seemed unaware of the bullets falling like hailstones from the roofs behind her. The sight of her smiling face calmed the young man.

‘It’s good to see you, Dr Lynn. Do you have any news?’

‘No, I was delivering medical supplies to the different detachments before they set off.’

‘We couldn’t take The Castle. There weren’t enough of us.’

‘Any casualties?’

‘Not on our side.’

‘Good. Is Helena Molony here?’

‘She’s in the kitchen; I’ll take you there.’

‘It might be best if you don’t leave the door unguarded, Corporal.’

‘You’re right, Captain Lynn.’

When Helena saw Kathleen, she rushed over to her and said: ‘I’m so glad you’re with us. Any news?’

‘No, I left before anything started. You had trouble at The Castle?’

‘Yes, they locked the gate before we could get in.’

‘It was built to withstand attacks. Do you have a first aid station?’

‘I’ll take you there. Would you like a cup of tea and a sandwich?’

'I'll wait until I've checked the station. The fire from The Castle is intense; we're going to have casualties.'

'I know.'

While Kathleen was unpacking bottles of morphine and field dressings, Helena asked: 'Where's Madeleine?'

'She's gone to Stephen's Green with Constance and Margaret Skinnider. Michael Mallin is their Commandant.'

'She'll be alright if she's with Constance.'

'We can only hope and pray.'

'What about Elizabeth O'Farrell and Julia?'

'They went with James and the other leaders to the GPO.'

'Julia will be relieved they're together.'

'I'm not sure it's a good thing. She'll be...'

They were interrupted by Séan Connolly who rushed into the room.

'Welcome, Captain Lynn. I'm glad you got here safely.' He turned to Helena and said: 'I need to get a message to the GPO. Will you take it?'

'Yes.'

He put out his hand and touched her arm. She was the member of his detachment he least wanted to lose – they were good friends, and she was the one he trusted most to deliver the despatches.

'I'll draw a map of the safest route. I know where the other detachments are located.'

'Good.'

While Séan drew the map, Helena turned to Kathleen and said: 'There are two letters in my knapsack.'

'I'll make sure they're delivered.'

'Thank you Kathleen.'

Helena took off her Sam Brown belt and put the pistol under the waist of her skirt. 'I once played a French governess in a farce so I'll imagine I'm playing her again when I'm out there. If I'm stopped, I'll say *I am governess from France for les enfants of the Lord Lieutenant, Baron Wimborne. I search for les croissants.*' She delivered the last two sentences in an atrocious French accent.

Kathleen laughed.

Séan handed Helena the map and the despatches. She rolled the despatches into a small tube, took the pins out of the bun at the

nape of her neck, hid the despatches in her long blonde hair, and arranged her hair in another bun.

'I've asked them for more men and more ammunition. There are hundreds of soldiers getting into The Castle from Ship Street - they're beyond our range.'

'I'll give it to James myself,' said Helena.

'God Bless you, Helena. I'll take you to a door on the east side.'

Helena and Kathleen held each other tight without saying anything.

When Helena was out in the street, she forgot about Séan's map and she started running along the quickest route she knew to the GPO. She soon found herself in a doorway on a deserted street where bullets were smashing shop windows and car windscreens. She couldn't see the snipers but they seemed to be everywhere. A black and white terrier lay dead on the footpath and she could hear a child screaming in an upstairs room.

'Not now, not here, not like this,' she whispered. 'Not so soon, before I've done anything. Not alone, left on the street to die like a dog.'

There was no lull in the shooting. The street had a strategic value; it was on the way to The Castle. The rebel snipers were trying to stop troops reaching The Castle and the army were trying to kill the rebels. The shooting was not going to stop. She would be caught in the cross fire if she went into the street. She was trapped.

The garrison in City Hall would be doomed if she didn't let James Connolly know they needed reinforcements. But she couldn't deliver the message if she were lying dead in the street. Going back was no less dangerous than going forward. Nothing in her training had prepared her for this. She looked around for help but she couldn't see anyone. The shop behind her was locked and deserted. No one would risk opening a door in case they were shot. She knew she couldn't stand the noise of the gunfire for much longer. She had never felt so alone.

She remembered the lunch at Kathleen's when Kathleen told her she was too young to die. She thought of Ella and wished she was lying safe in her arms. If Constance was with her, she'd know what to do. Constance would shoot her way out.

She went down on her knees and prayed to a God she had long

neglected. And she prayed to her dead mother, asking her for protection. When she had finished, she raised one knee to stand again but before she raised the other knee, she shouted: 'That's it – that's what I'll do.'

She knelt again, put her hands on the ground, and slowly crawled out of the doorway, keeping her head low.