

Irish Easter Rising of 1916

Frances was silent for a while, looking towards Kingstown. The spire of the Mariners' church emerged from its veil of darkness and shone in a silvery grey.

She said suddenly,

'I can't think why it doesn't all blow up.'

'what?'

'Oh, I don't know, I mean society, everything. Why do the poor people put up with us? Why do the men go and fight in that stupid, ghastly war? Why don't they all say, no, no, no?'

'I agree with you Frances. It's extraordinary what people will put up with. But they just feel helpless. What can they do? What can any of us do?'

'People should not feel helpless. Something ought to be done. I saw today by Stephen's Green – I was in town this morning – oh, it was so sad – a girl, a mother, she must have been my age, with clothes, well they weren't clothes, just jumbled bits of stuff, and four little children, all of them barefoot, and she was begging, and the little kids were sort of dressed up like little monkeys, and trying to dance, and they were crying all the time!'

'I expect they were hungry.'

'Well, it's scandalous, wicked, and a society which allows it deserves to be blown to bits.'

'But dearest Frances, you must have seen girls like that girl a hundred times. Dublin is full of them.'

'Yes, I know, and that's awful. One gets used to it. I've just been thinking more about it lately. It shouldn't be. And I can't think why they don't attack us, jump on us like wild animals, instead of just humbly holding out their hand for a penny.'

Barney agreed with her that it shouldn't be. But after all what could one do? The begging mother, the starving children, the men in the trenches, the Germans down in the U-boats. It was a mad and tragic world. Now if he had been a priest...

'Barney, do you think there'll be any trouble in Ireland?'

'You mean fighting here?'

'Yes, about Home Rule and so on.'

'No, of course not. Home Rule will come automatically after the war.'

'So there's nothing to fight about, is there?'

'Nothing at all.'

'And anyway, Father was saying they have no arms. They *can't* fight.'

'No, they can't.'

'Barney, what will home Rule do for that woman begging in the street?'

Barney thought for a moment.

'Absolutely nothing.'

'It won't touch that level of people at all?'

'Well, they'll have the pleasure of being exploited by P. Flanagan instead of J. Smith.'

'Then the thing is not worth fighting for anyway.'

'Wait a minute. It's worth having one's national freedom,' said Barney. He felt a bit vague about it. 'once Ireland's free of England, it will be easier to set the house in order.'

'I don't see why. Some people say there ought to be a rising against the whole thing, against the English and against the Irish employers too. James Connolly says that doesn't he?'

'Yes, but it's all dreams, Frances. They couldn't do it. And it would be just a very nasty mess if they tried. Those people don't know how to run the country.'

'Do the people who let that woman beg and her children starve know how to run the country?'

'Well, I see what you mean. But law and order are important too. 'The workers should stick to the Trade Unions, that's how they'll better themselves.'

'But the government and the employers won't allow the Trade Unions.'

'They will, they'll have to. You are getting quite a political woman, these days, Frances. We'll see you in uniform next!'

'I ought to be in uniform. But I don't know which one to wear!'

Extract from Iris Murdoch *The red and the green*. London, Chatto & Windus, 1965