

## Part II, Chapter 18 Fire

“Mr. Daly says he will get a horse for Willie when he’s ready, which will not be for a few more years.” When Mrs. Daly gave this ultimatum to Bridget, she knew Tom would be disappointed. He had hoped that Jack would have a better life than his mother.

“Why not team Jack alongside Dolly on your cart?” Bridget had asked Tom that evening. “That would ease the load on Dolly, wouldn’t it?”

Tom had had to think about that for a while. Cartmen with a team of horses were often given better loads—especially of furniture. People preferred their household furniture be carried by a team, for stability and safety. A team could pull heavier loads, e.g., coal, stone, hides. Tom hadn’t even sought them for Dolly. Once he had seen a mule high in the air when the weight of its load had tilted the cart backwards, and everyone laughed. He wouldn’t want Dolly to be laughed at. Two horses could pull at least a ton. One horse could pull its own weight—some horses could pull one and a half times their own weight. Heavy loads earned more money—they would also be harder for him to handle. He was torn between the possibilities of having a two-horse team and the dream that Jackson would be a trotter or pacer.

He decided that Bridget was right, and began breaking Jack to harness—he was already used to a halter and bit, so after a few weeks of gradually harnessing him up alongside Dolly, Jack accepted the harness, and Dolly welcomed him to the team. Perhaps she had wondered all along why her son hadn’t joined her when he was able. Jack had remained shy of the traffic, but harnessed beside Dolly, he gained a new confidence. Together they looked like a strong team. Tom could still dream of Sunday drives in the country.

By December winter had already set in. Snow had fallen continuously for days, to the point that Tom had to take off the wheels and put bobsled runners on the axels of his cart. He had also had the blacksmith insert caulks into the horses’ shoes so they wouldn’t slide. Each morning he warmed their bits with his breath before putting them into their mouths. He covered them with canvas blankets to keep them warm,

When he added sleigh bells for a festive sound, he thought that if Bridget hadn’t been so obviously pregnant, they might have gone for a sleigh ride, but he couldn’t ask her to climb up onto the seat. She was spending all her time at home, helping Tim with his “ready-made” line. When Tim received an order for another embroidered vest with a shawl collar, he asked \$3.50, and told Bridget she could have her own “line” and keep whatever she earned, as she helped him enough with his ready-mades. She had picked out silks in different colors from Mr. Tappan and had begun making the waistcoats in different colors and with different patterns of flowers. She kept track of her “expenses” and hoped to

make a profit when she had finished and sold some. Perhaps she could make up for income she might have had from the Dalys had her pregnancy not “confined” her.

Tom had finished for the day and was leading the horses back along Fulton from Pearl when he smelled smoke and thought he saw some puffs rising a few blocks to the south. He was alarmed—there had been a fire nearby only a few days earlier, and everyone knew that the fire department hadn’t been able to put that one out, owing to the water being frozen. Others saw the smoke and were raising an alarm, so he hurried his horses home and into their shed—he didn’t want to alarm them. After taking his usual pains to make them comfortable and put their water, oats and hay out, and closing the shed door and padlocking it, he ran back into the street to see where the fire was and whether they might be in danger.

The smoke now was visible and seemed to be coming from the financial district. He ran down Williams and saw that fire horses and Engine Company No. 1 were heading down there too, clanging its bells as it went. His horses were sure to hear that and become alarmed. The northwest wind was ferocious, and arriving at the source, Tom could see that the one of the dry-goods warehouses on Pearl at Exchange Street was on fire and the wind was spreading the fire to nearby warehouses. He could see that nothing would stop the flames from spreading along Pearl Street, where the city’s richest dry goods stores were located, including the Tappan Brothers silk imports. He ran home to alert his family and to consult with Tim on whether there was any danger that the fire might come back in their direction. It was already below zero; the water hydrants would be frozen, the river was frozen. Water put onto the fire would quickly freeze anyway and everything would become covered with ice.

He was torn between wanting to stay home with his family and wanting to see what was happening and whether he could help. Little Nell volunteered to stay with the horses to calm them and talk to them should the clanging of the fire engines terrify them, and he and Tim headed back to the fire. By the time they returned, many more of the warehouses were in flames, all the fire and smoke was blowing toward the East River. The fire engines had gone to get water from the River and had to cut holes in the ice to get water. But the water was of no use as it froze in their hoses. When they did get the water flowing, the strong wind blew it back into their faces and onto their clothes and boots where it froze. Firemen were pouring brandy into their boots to melt the ice so they could walk.

Merchants were tossing bales of their merchandise out the windows into the street to save them. Some people were helping rescue them, but others were looting. Tom and Tim joined those rescuing the merchandise and running to capture the papers and records that were thrown out as well, but the chase was fruitless and most ended up in the River. Explosions came from some buildings. The crowd had grown so great that volunteer firemen came to

control the crowd away and prevent looting. They formed a cordon along South Street, from Fulton Ferry to Wall Street, and up Wall Street to Exchange. Grateful merchants were giving blankets, hats and other items to those who helped them



helped them

The fire spread on, and by midnight it was far enough up Wall Street that it was at the doors of the Merchant Exchange. "That won't burn," people were shouting. "It's marble!" But the merchants weren't taking any chances and were retrieving their merchandise. Tim and Tom were too exhausted to help and were glad to see that the volunteer firemen were helping the

merchants. Within a half hour, the building was smoldering and by 2 it was up in flames. The two men could see that the whole financial and commercial district was going to go up in flames and that the embers were blowing so far that even the ships in the harbor were in danger from flying sparks and embers. They headed back toward Pearl Street where they saw looters helping themselves to the piles of goods that they had helped to rescue. Tom was angry that people were taking advantage of a catastrophe to enrich themselves. "What can we do?" Tim shook his head sadly. Tom took up his stand beside some of the merchandise and dared looters to take it. He had no idea whose it was, but if it was his, he would have wanted someone to help him. When the owner returned to it, he gave Tom and Tim each a fine wool blanket to thank them.

They heard that the Mayor had ordered a gunpowder barge be brought, so that a building could be blown up to create a fire break. The two men saw that indeed, a barge arrived at the foot of Wall Street. "It's from the Navy Yard," a voice in the crowd said. A building must have been identified, for the gunpowder was towed over Wall Street to the intersection of Exchange and Broad Street. Someone in the crowd knew the building. "It's a grocery!" If the fire jumped across Broad Street it would endanger residential neighborhoods adjoining the financial district. By 5 a.m. the powder kegs were in place, and someone was found to ignite it. A huge explosion lit up the sky, and then another one, right next to it, for the building next door at 52 Exchange Place had also been filled with explosives to create a barrier. More buildings were set on fire intentionally, and the fire finally burned itself out in the early morning of December 17.

The two men went home to tell their families that the fire was out. They found that no one had slept all night. Nell had stayed with the horses, who would otherwise have been terrified by the explosions and sounds. Bridget and Betty were too frightened to sleep and had sat by the windows keeping an eye on the progress of the fire. The men told their story, showed their wool blankets, and when Tom told Bridget that the Tappans' silk import warehouse had

undoubtedly been destroyed as well, she was horrified. “After all he’s been through—they’ve tried to burn his place before, and now to have this happen.” She was not satisfied until he had gone back, after a few hours of sleep, to check. There was no question of going to work, for all the dry goods warehouses he usually got loads from were now in ruins. The fire had shut down lower Manhattan.

He reported to her later what had happened, as he had learned from inquiring at the site. “Several black rushed to save his building. It was stone, you know, and they hoped it wouldn’t burn down. It did withstand the flames for almost an hour, allowing the Tappans and other helpers to remove as much of their merchandise as they could. He didn’t have much insurance, though, I heard. You know, he’s the president of the Antislavery Society, and has had threats on his life and property—remember last summer? No New York insurance agency would insure him, they said, but a Boston firm had covered him for \$300,000. He should get a new building out of that. Lucky that he saved a lot of his store—about \$100,000 of it, Bridget, so there’ll be silks for you to choose—whenever he gets a new building.

While the fire took away his regular work, Tom found it offered a new cargo—charred contents from destroyed buildings. “Haul it away,” they would say. “Clean up the site!” Merchants were eager to clear away all signs of the fire so they could begin anew.

That Christmas Bridget had finished three waistcoats. She hadn’t sold any, so she gave them to Tom, Tim and Michael. When Michael wore his at the saloon, Bridget got some orders.