

Part II Chapter 19 1836—Nothing but a Dream?

“I’m going to expand—add ready-made lines.” Tim was talking to an old customer in the shop. “I’m going to add more counter space here and shelf space up there, and put a ready-made display area over there. I hope that by next fall you’ll see shelves stacked with fabrics for custom-mades, and racks with ready-mades-- suits, waistcoats and even coats.” Bridget heard this from where she was working in the back room. “I’m going to hire a helper, while my wife and some other seamstresses—will work in the back.”

That evening as he was closing the shop for the day, she asked him about what she had overheard.

He seemed unwilling to go into it, but she probed him. “This concerns our future, Tim.”

“Well—it’s still nothing but a dream, but, well—it does affect all of us. You know that the competition has gotten ahead of me.



Even wealthy men have begun buying ready-mades—fortunately Mr. Daly hasn’t gotten to that point yet, nor have other men who haven’t the time to go out shopping. The ready-mades are driving the prices down, so I’ve got to join them. I’ve got to catch up with the factories, if I’m going to stay in business. I was thinking that if I take a loan from the bank and fix this place up—I could attract the ready-made trade and even more custom. I’ll need your help, Bridget. I’ll need to hire a cutter, and you and Betty will do the piece-work in the back. Maybe you could see if there’s a seamstress or two over with those Magdalen women. Better than being a laundress, eh?”

Tim seemed not to understand what was bothering her. “Tim, what about us? Were you thinking of having the seamstresses working back in our room? There’s barely enough for the three of us and we’re expecting another in April or May.”

“We’ll find somewhere nearby for you and Tom, Bridget. What I bring in with the ready-mades will more than make up for even the extra rent that I’ll be having to charge you, now that rents are going up all around.”

Bridget couldn’t argue with him and decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Tom could handle this, when and if Tim went ahead with his plans.

She was concerned, then, when she saw that Tim had put a sign in the window, “**Experienced Tailor Wanted. Apply Within.**” The next morning the first applicant showed up--Andreas Meyer, 22 years old, a tailor from Bernkastel, on

the Mosel in Bavaria. He had been apprenticed as a tailor since he was 17 in Germany was now qualified as a Master Tailor. Tim liked him, but he couldn't speak English, so he didn't offer him the position. That afternoon a young Black man applied for the job later in the day. He was a freedman who said he was "good with the needle" and wanted to become an apprentice and learn to be a tailor. Bridget heard Tim tell him that he needed an experienced tailor to be a cutter, and he was sorry that he couldn't train him. "I'm glad I didn't have to hire him," he told Betty and Bridget later. "Don't want trouble with the anti-abolitionists." Fearing who else might apply, he took down the sign, so when a young Irish man applied the next morning, Tim could tell him, "You're too late." "Might have problems with him too," he told the women, "problems the Irish get into--fighting and drinking—" He offered Andreas the position, "You'll start as a journeyman, at eight shillings a day," he told him, assuring him that the wage would go up to 10 shillings if he was as skilled as the German tailors usually were.

Bridget's baby—a boy, arrived in April, in an easy birth. "William, after my Da," she told Mrs. Daly, when she took him to show her after the christening. "Doesn't he look like Thomas?" Thomas had come along, carrying Helena, who was nearly two and could walk on her own, but would be fussing after such a long walk. "Had it been a girl we would called her Rosana after my Mama." When Mrs. Daly agreed that William did look very like his father, Bridget confided to her, "Perhaps that's why I feel he's so special—He looks like my husband and is named for my Da. "

Mrs. Daly received them in the back parlor, where her own Willie was much in evidence, dressed in fine clothes—little britches and a jacket. "Doesn't he look like a little man, though he is only two," she beamed.

Bridget couldn't resist asking who had made such a fine outfit. "Can you believe it?" Mother found it at a ready-made tailor shop." She wondered what such wonderful outfits cost—she would have to tell Tim. Maybe he could offer a line of children's ready-mades.

Bridget and Betty were having trouble keeping up with the faster pace of work now that there was a cutter, Andreas, or Andy, as Tim called him. He was very good at measuring and cutting and worked swiftly; if only they could communicate with him. Tim had only to show Andy what he wanted and the German would know immediately what to do—no further communication was necessary. But when Andy wanted to tell the women how to do certain things, they didn't understand a word that he said, and he had to take time to show them what he was talking about.

Betty had borne another daughter, Cathy, in March, and together the women were feeding four children, the two men, and occasionally Andreas if he worked late, as he sometimes did, especially on Wednesdays, when he knew they would

cook corned beef with potatoes and cabbage, his favorite. Once some of his friends had even stopped by to take him to look for a “beer hall,” and the women had taken pity on him and asked his friends to stay so he could have his favorite meal.

His friends included journeymen Germans working in various trades—shoemakers, bakers, locksmiths, cabinetmakers. Their English was poor, but Tim understood that they had joined unions. “Und Anreas auch!” At their urging, Andy had joined the journeyman tailors’ union.

Tom was boasting of how well his business was faring, now that Jack was “doing his share.” Tom had tailored the cart to suit the heavier construction materials now being used to rebuild in the fire area. One day in late May, however, he went to the site and found that the construction workers there were on strike. “No loads today,” they told him, and turned his cart away. He went to another warehouse out of the fire area, where he could usually count on a job, but received the same warning to move away—“On Strike.”

Strikes were spreading. At the docks, the shipwrights and stevedores and riggers are on strike. Why was everyone on strike, he asked Tim that evening, after a day in which he had only managed to find one job—moving some furniture for a small tenant who was moving to other rooms.

“It’s the factories are doing it,” Tim told him. “Conditions are bad in the factories, Wages are being cut while living costs, and rents are skyrocketing.”

The following morning, when Tom returned with his cart, he found hundreds were milling around. There was no work for anyone. People were angry and began throwing things and fighting. The National Guard had to be called out. The strikes just spread further.

Other trade unions joined, especially journeymen unions, and Tim was not surprised when the tailors were caught up in it. “They should strike,” he said. “They’re working in factory sweat shops.” By Saturday night, he was beginning to be apprehensive. “Seems some tailors, as many as twenty, were arrested and hauled off to court for protesting the lowering of their wages, and the Judge found them all guilty. This could get nasty,” he added.

The next day as they were returning from Mass, they all saw the men carrying placards with a picture of a coffin. They stopped to read the words:

JOURNEYMEN TAILORS. "The Rich against the Poor! Judge Edwards, the tool of the Aristocracy, against the People! Mechanics and workingmen! a deadly blow has been struck at your Liberty! The prize for which your fathers fought has been robbed from you! The Freeman of the North are now on a level with the slaves of the South! with no other privileges than laboring that drones may fatten on your life-blood! Twenty of your brethren have been found guilty for presuming to resist a reduction of their wages! and

Judge Edwards has charged an American jury, and agreeably to that charge, they have established the precedent, that workingmen have no right to regulate the price of labor! or, in other words, the Rich are the only judges of the wants of the Poor Man! On Monday, June 6, these Freeman are to receive their sentence, to gratify the hellish appetites of the Aristocracy! On Monday, the Liberty of the Workingmen will be interred! Judge Edwards is to chant the Requiem! Gol Gol Gol every Freeman, every Workingman, and hear the hollow and the melancholy sound of the earth on the Coffin of Equality! Let the Court-room, the City-hall --yea, the whole Park, be filled with Mourners! But, remember, offer no violence to Judge Edwards! Bend meekly, and receive the chains wherewith you are to be bound! Keep the peace! Above all things keep the peace! . . ."

Everyone wanted to know what would happen to the tailors. On Monday, crowds headed to the City Hall Park to stand outside the Court and protest the verdict, which they expected go against the tailors. No one came to the tailor shop that day, not even Andreas.

"Perhaps he's on strike," Betty laughed.

With the city nearly shut down by the strikers, Tim and Tom decided to go to City Hall and see for themselves. They found a huge rally in City Hall Park—working men from all areas. "I bet there are must be more than 30,000 people here." Tom was astonished. He had never seen such a crowd, coming from a tiny place like Tuam. Even Galway didn't have this many people.

They listened as speaker after speaker denounced the courts, the bankers, merchants, employers and both major parties for going against the "spirit and genius of Republican government." Alexander Ming, Jr., and William Murphy, men whose names they never heard spoke and whose words were met with loud and repeated cheerings from the vast audience. Then someone-- Mr. John H. Bowie—he was introduced as, stood up and read a length resolution:

Whereas the Mechanics and Workingmen of this city, cannot view the late attacks made upon their rights, by men in whose hands has been entrusted the administration of the laws, but with feelings of deep and heartfelt indignation; being fully of opinion that it is a concerted plan of the aristocracy to take from them that Liberty which was bequeathed to them, as a sacred inheritance by their revolutionary sires-- an inheritance purchased by their blood, and consummated by their patriotism and wisdom; and, whereas, the recent conduct of Ogden Edwards, presiding judge at the trial of the Journeymen Tailors for Conspiracy (?) in the court of Oyer and Terminer, was manifestly partial and unjust, inasmuch as he would admit of no evidence on the part of the Workingmen to prove that the employing tailors, not them, were culpable--that they, if any, were the conspirators--that they, in a season noticed for its inclemency, conspired to reduce the wages of their workmen--and that such conspiracy was the cause of the stand out of the journeymen: thus, manifesting his well-known partiality for the Rich, and his notorious injustice to the Poor; and whereas, the charge as delivered to the jury, and the sentence as pronounced by him, to the convicted laborers, embodied distinctions and principles utterly at variance with the spirit and genius of our Republican government, assertions not justified by the evidence, and constructions of the laws distorted and tortured into such hideous form

that they threaten tyranny to the people, and destruction to the State; thus grasping at authority that was never intended to be given him--making laws instead of declaring them-- and claiming to unite in his imbecile personage, not only judicial but legislative power! and whereas, when such innovations upon the Rights of the People are openly proclaimed from the bench--adopted by the aristocracy--swallowed by an "impartial jury!"--and hung o'er our heads as a "grim skeleton" to frighten us into a still deeper vortex of degradation, that we may become but mere tools to build up princely fortunes for men who grasp at all and produce nothing--it becomes us at such a time to speak in a voice that will admit of no doubt, no misgivings as to the course we are determined to pursue. We have before us an example worthy of imitation, that holy combination of that immortal band of Mechanics, who despite the injury inflicted upon "trade and commerce," "conspired, confederated, and agreed," and by overt acts did throw into Boston harbor the Tea that had branded upon it "Taxation without Representation." This now is the substance of our grievances. We are taxed but not represented, our legislators, our judges, are men, whose situation in life, will not admit of sympathizing with the "back bone of the body politic." Legislative combinations are yearly created that draw from the poor their very life blood; and when the producers of all the necessaries and luxuries of life, are by combinations of Bankers, of Merchants, and dealers in all exchangeable commodities who operate upon the currency, and the prices of articles requisite for our very subsistence--compelled by actual want to act in defence, the hideous yells of wolves, "learned in legal lore," are immediately heard; and the strong arm of tyranny and injustice is interposed to crush the toil worn laborer. And as our laws, by an insidious aristocracy, are so mystified that men of common understandings, cannot unravel them--construction is forced upon construction--mystification is heaped upon mystification, and precedent furnished upon precedent, to show that what the people thought was liberty, bore not a semblance to its name. Therefore, in the name of liberty and equality, be it

RESOLVED, that to all acts of tyranny and injustice, resistance is just, and therefore necessary; and the vain declarations of the omnipotence of the decisions of Savage and Edwards, and the imperious doctrines of the necessity of absolute submission, is indeed impotent to men who feel that such acts are equally intolerable, whether they be exercised by domestic traitors or foreign foes!

RESOLVED, that the construction given to the law, in the case of the Journeymen Tailors, is not only ridiculous and weak in practice, but unjust in principle, and subversive of the rights and liberties of American citizens; and he who would so far forget his oath to administer the laws faithfully, as did Judge (?) Edwards in his charge to the jury, is no longer entitled to the confidence of the people, and as such should no longer be allowed to disgrace that bench, from which nought should emanate but common sense, honesty, and equal and impartial justice, as well to the murderer as to the honest citizen.

RESOLVED, that from the close alliance which we have witnessed between the leaders of the two great political parties of this State, to crush the laboring men, we are led to believe that our rights can at all times be best advanced and defended by such men as have shown by their acts that they have some sympathy for the rights and happiness of their more humble and oppressed fellow citizens. Therefore, be it

RESOLVED, that viewing as we do our present grievances flowing from a partial administration of the laws engendered by unequal legislation, it becomes us to arrest the

evils proceeding therefrom, by the constitutional and safe antidote of the ballot box. Therefore,

RESOLVED, that this meeting recommend to our fellow mechanics and working men throughout the State, that a Convention be held at Utica, on the 15th day of September next, to take into consideration the propriety of forming a separate and distinct party, around which the laboring classes and their friends, can rally with confidence....

The resolutions were unanimously adopted by acclamation.

“These fellows are still fighting the Revolution,” Tom told Tim on their way home that evening.

The next day Andy was back, looking sheepish. Bridget wondered if he had had anything to do with the placards being visibly placed along their street on Sunday morning. She couldn’t ask him. One result of the strike was that Tim raised Andy’s wages to 10 shillings (\$1.25).

By September, however, the urge to strike had lessened, and no one was urging them to go to Utica. Hessian flies had devastated the wheat crop in western New York that summer of 1836 and in the ensuing shortage flour prices soared. People were struggling to afford flour. On top of that, a bubble in the stock market suddenly burst that fall and precipitated a decline that carried over into the next year, resulting in a general financial panic in May 1837; banks stopped lending or paying and by June the economy was falling apart. More than half of the craft workers lost their jobs, and Tim had to let Andy go and couldn’t even pay Bridget.

“What good are the unions now?” Even Tim asked that question. “People aren’t bothering to deal with their employers. They’re going right to the people they blame for their problems-- the merchants who sell them flour.” People were breaking into warehouses, seizing flour, fending off the police. There was a food riot outside a warehouse. “Reminds me of the Bowery,” Tom said. “This’ll be the end of the unions for a while.”

Bridget was glad that at least Tim wasn’t talking anymore about expanding and needing the back room.