

Part II Chapter 2. Michael



Eager as Bridget was to leave the “Whiskey Ward,” Thomas knew he couldn’t think of looking for another rooming house or even for his brother Michael until he had found gainful employment. He thought to himself briefly that he would have liked to work as a ship’s carpenter, a fancy that he conceived during their days at sea. He had inquired and heard that there were navy shipyards right across the East River in Brooklyn, but when he mentioned this to Bridget, she told him to forget his dreams for the moment. Later, when he had a bit saved up, he might search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Meanwhile, he needed to find work quickly. She wanted her table cloth back, and had been cajoling the landlady, Mrs. Malloy, its present owner, hoping to get it back in exchange for the \$5 rent money they owed. Thomas set off to look for work as a carpenter at construction sites nearby.

That evening, after dinner in the hotel’s saloon, he reported to the men who asked what success he had finding work. “I’m beginning to think that only Irishmen were out looking for work this day; there must have been a stream of us.”

“No Irish need apply?” suggested O’Malley.

“It almost broke my heart to hear those words spoken in Amerikay.”

“Not even a cartman’s job?”

“I am ashamed to admit that I even asked after a cartman’s job, saying I had heard the Irish were quite good at that line of work. . .” He laughed along with the other men. “But they sent me along, saying they had quite enough cartmen, thank you, and moreover, the Irish are known troublemakers.”

“Might you be a bit ashamed to admit you’re Irish, Thomas,” O’Malley suggested again.

“It’s not what I expected,” Thomas admitted.

Bridget, meanwhile, had negotiated an arrangement with Mrs. Malloy whereby she could earn \$5 a month as a charlady, doing odd jobs around the boarding house—cleaning, laundry, dish-washing after suppers. Thomas was skeptical. Mrs. Malloy’s behavior had given him little reason to trust her.

“Is there any danger, McMahan? Bridget’s a level-headed girl, but I fear Mrs. Malloy will take advantage of her. What do you know of Mrs. Malloy. Can we trust her?”

McMahon frowned, "Mrs. Malloy is mysterious, keeps to herself, doesn't mingle. We know that there is no Mr. Malloy. We don't really know who she works for-- racketeers, that's for sure, exploiting innocents like yourself. The wage is very low, of course. I wouldn't expect anything else of Mrs. Malloy. Your wife could earn more if she worked in a big house. Irish women are more employable than Irish men." Thomas looked taken aback at the thought that Bridget might be the better breadwinner.

The pattern continued for the next few weeks, Bridget cleaning vacant rooms and preparing them for the new occupants, and Thomas looking for work, "Mrs. Malloy says I'm a good worker," Bridget bragged to Thomas, when he returned from another day of fruitless searching.

"Well, I'm proud of you, Bridge," he had to acknowledge.

Wherever Thomas went, he asked for his brother at all the worksites, but no one had heard of Michael O'Shaughnessy. Thomas had come to appreciate the familial atmosphere at the boarding house and had even gotten used to O'Malley. He had asked them to keep an eye out as well.

One Saturday evening, O'Malley announced after dinner, "I think your brother may have turned up." "Michael Shaughnessy, was it?"

"Where is he?" Thomas asked, eagerly.

"In Bridewell."

"I don't believe it. Surely not. What's he done?" Thomas was glad the ladies weren't there to hear that Michael was in jail.

"It seems he's a cartman after all—we expected as much—and there he was, pushing his cart along following a line of carts heading up Third Avenue around 18th when a merchant's buggy clipped his cart. Your brother Michael must have a fiery temper, for he grabbed the horse's bridle and forced him up on the sidewalk. The merchant rose up in anger at your brother—no doubt knowing he was Irish-- raised his whip and slashed at Michael, who raised a cry. His fellow cartmen dropped their carts, raced to his defense and called for support. Out came Irish from various groceries and joined in the fray, roughing up the merchant along with some other buggies, engaging in a good old Irish free-for-all that turned into a riot. It was in the newspapers, they say. All the Irish were arrested of course, and all the merchants went home. End of story. So if you want to find your brother, Thomas, go to the jail."

Michael's Story

The jailhouse was overcrowded, and Thomas had to wait in line in a large waiting room with mothers carrying children in their arms—of course Thomas let them go ahead of him, until it was his turn to ask to be shown to Michael O'Shaughnessy's cell. The policeman laughed at him. "He's out in the back padlock, with the rest of the Irish fighting vermin, right next to the prostitutes."

A policeman led Thomas to the back and gestured to a room, where behind bars were crowded what must have been a hundred men in a large room—some lying on the floor indifferent to those forced to step over them. "You'll find him in there, somewhere," the officer waved indifferently.

"Michael," Thomas shouted, upon seeing a face that vaguely resembled his brother. Michael was leaning against a wall, looking dazed and exhausted. The two brothers embraced and wept. Thomas had not seen him for over two years and was shocked at how he had changed. His arms and legs and back had grown strong. Yes, it was he; he was the cartman who had interfered with the rights of merchant to run over the cartmen on the New York streets. Yes, he lived in Five Points too, all right, in a cellar. "Mouldy, rat-infested, but as a single man, I can't claim better, and I am paying next to nothing—a few pennies a month." Michael had been sending money home and they thought he must be doing well; he had even sent the £5 for their passage. "Took me six months to save that," he admitted. And no surprise that they couldn't find him, as he had no time to go to the pubs. He worked every day. "Except Sundays."

Thomas briefly caught Michael up on his own life, how he had worked as a carpenter's apprentice at the Berminghams until Bridget thought he could stand on his own, how he had promised to return the money to Father O'Toole that the diocese had spent educating him, how they had waited and sailed in June on the Liberty from Liverpool, as Michael had suggested, how they had gotten suckered into a boarding house run by racketeers, and how Bridget was working for Mrs. Malloy to recover her prized table cloth, how he hadn't been able to find work although he'd been looking for almost three weeks. . . He could see that Michael wasn't able to appreciate what he was telling him; he was in urgent need of help himself. His biggest fear was that he might be sent to Auburn prison—"It's a dead end. No money to hire a lawyer. . . I'd be stuck doing contract labor, earning money for the prison. I'd never get out."

What could he do to help? Here he was a stranger in New York himself, with no friends but the boys at the boarding house, and here Michael, who he had hoped would lend him a hand up, was facing a prison term. Thomas had to find his own job; he couldn't go looking for advice. "Go find someone to get me out, please, Thomas. " Michael pleaded. "You've come just in time."

Irish Benevolent Societies

Michael inquired back at the boarding house about who could help get his brother out of jail. “You could try The Friendly Sons of St. Patrick,” O’Malley suggested. “Better not waste your time on them, Thomas,” another countered. “They’re only friendly to the Scotch-Irish. No, I’ve heard you want the Hibernians.”

Thomas found there were a number of Irish benevolent organizations like the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick (more associated with the Irish middle class), and several Hibernian groups (more associated with the poor). So he tried the Hibernian Provident Society. They were sympathetic, but would rather help widows and orphans than an Irishman who had fought his way into jail. The Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society? They listened too, but wanted to know why a new immigrant like himself wasn’t hunting for work, and not bothering about someone who’d been here for two years and ended up in jail. Maybe they could help him--

“Well, when I can get my brother out of jail, I can get back to looking for work, but meanwhile he’s on his way up to Auburn prison for life, and it’s up to me to save him.”

Salvation from the Church

Finally, he turned to their parish church—St. Peter’s, the oldest church in New York, at Barclay and Church, a diagonal walk down Chatham to Park and Broadway. He told the priest there, Father Michael Maloney, his story. As Father knew, he’d only arrived a few weeks earlier, and had expected to find a successful brother who could help him. Well, it turned out his brother was in jail, possibly about to be sent to the Auburn penitentiary. “Please help us, Father.”

One thing Thomas found out *was* different here, was that the priests, who had come from Ireland themselves, at the request of the bishop, to minister to the growing number of immigrants, had political connections. They were familiar with the police, having been called in by them to get drunken husbands back to their families, for example. If they felt sorry for you, Thomas heard, they might help. Thomas had what every priest looks for—a simple heart and an absolute faith in the Church as the source of salvation. If Father O’Hara could do anything to confirm that faith he would. He took the information about Michael and told Thomas that he would look into it, and to keep the faith. He would not crush the simple of heart.

This was Thomas’s first experience in acknowledging that he needed the support of the Irish community. Thomas hadn’t wanted to be helped by anyone; he was intent on making his own way, with a little help from his brother, it’s true, but

mostly he had confidence that he could do better for himself than others could do for him.

Father Maloney knew someone at police headquarters, who warned Michael that if he got in trouble with the law again, so much as stealing an apple, he could end up in the penitentiary, as he now had a **Record** with the New York City Metropolitan Police.

So that was how Michael got out of jail, and when Bridget saw where he was living, she arranged it with Mrs. Malloy so Michael could move in as well, sharing a room with 7 other men for a few cents a day.

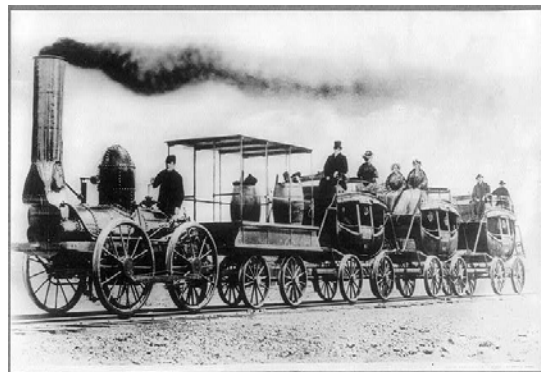
Bridget had gotten on the good side of Mrs. Malloy and couldn't jeopardize her table cloth, so she didn't mention in public her disapproval of the way the place was run or the language that was used or the fights that erupted and no one stopped. She needed to stay friends with Mrs. Malloy. But Thomas knew she was only biding her time until she could redeem her table cloth and move out of Five Points and the Sixth Ward. But that meant that he must find a job, now that Michael was safe.

Unfortunately, Michael was now also out of work, having been fired by the foreman from his job for fighting, causing a riot, and being arrested. This time Thomas turned to the Irish community, went back to the Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society, and said he wasn't asking to get a man out of jail but to get two men jobs.

"You're in luck, then, as they're hiring up at the Harlem Railroad, I hear."

Cartman

The New York and Harlem Railroad had been chartered in 1831 to operate from 23rd Street in Manhattan to the Harlem River. When Thomas and Bridget arrived, 23rd Street was considered the northern edge of New York City, and the northern end of Manhattan Island was still very rural. It had been decided that 23rd Street was too far north, and the charter was amended to move the starting point south to Prince Street. This first part which had used horses, had been finished and the extension north of 23rd to 32nd along Fourth Avenue was just beginning. Steam engines were to run on some of these tracks. Thomas was immediately taken by the idea of being able to contribute, no matter in what capacity. The two brothers applied together and as this project



would run for many miles, and might take many years, they heard, they could come on as cartmen.

They had to buy their own carts, however, and they had no money. Michael had no idea what had happened to the one he had in the fight. “Someone probably nicked it. With a cart, you can get a lot of work—hauling coal, delivering. A man needs a cart.”

Michael knew where to get them, he laughed—from the thieves. “Come along, Thomas. I’m going to show you the better side of New York.”

The Forty Thieves

The place where Michael led him was to a grocery store on Centre Street, along where the rail tracks were to be laid.

“This is Rosanna’s place,” Michael told him. “Rosanna Peers.”

Thomas looked at the wilting lettuce, brown cabbage, dried-up apples, and inquired who would buy such rotting groceries. Michael ignored his questions and led him around to the back where Thomas found himself surrounded by Irishmen, drinking rum, laughing and boasting of their exploits, while someone went around kidding with each man, inspecting items offered to him, appraising each, patting each on the back. He looked up and waved when he saw Michael.

“Edward Coleman, this is my brother Thomas, who got me out of prison when I had that little problem. You recall.”

Michael told Thomas that Coleman’s men who called themselves the Forty Thieves had helped out that day. “They had our backs when the riot broke out.”

“We need two carts, Coleman. Any of your men find anything like that recently?”

Later Michael explained that the Forty Thieves had no doubt picked up their share of booty in the riot, as they always managed to find chaotic scenes to do their pick-pocketing. Coleman gave them two carts—for “whatever you can pay.” Thomas wondered who owed whom.

“Better than the old one,” Michael added. “Thomas, I wouldn’t mention this to Bridget.”