

Part II Chapter 20 1837: Hard Times

Did Thomas ever ponder the irony that he who had been born with a caul, singled out, destined for the priesthood, was now caring for loads of rubble stone instead of immortal souls. He was not



much given to self-reflection but occasionally as he, Dolly and Jack were wending their way up Pearl Street with another load, he wondered what he had done with his life, what he had made of himself, he who dreamed of forging a new identity in America, on a grander scale in a grander setting. What had he amounted to? No more than a laborer, the least significant level of society, not even a tradesman or artisan. He was not a butcher, baker, grocer, tailor--not even a saloon-keeper. He had nothing to boast of and care for but two children (and another on the way), two horses and a cart, and a hard-working, loyal and supportive wife. His inclination to boast had been considerably subdued by his last three years in New York. New York had taught him the truth about himself. He had been a big fish in a little pond, and now he was a little fish in a big pond. He was happy even to have one load in his cart, especially in 1837.

1837 had turned out to be a very bad year—a year of financial panic. Banks weren't lending money. Construction jobs stopped. Work for cartmen gradually fell off along with other trades. Tom found himself competing with cartmen who were desperate. He used to get 3 shillings for a load, and by taking 6 loads a day, he could earn \$2.50-\$3.00/day. Now he was lucky if he could get two jobs a day—Gradually, in the months since May when the bubble burst and the depression hit, there were fewer loads, and with more men competing for them, the desperate cartmen began lowering their fees, charging only 2 shillings for even heavy loads. Six heavy loads which formerly would have brought him almost \$2.50, now brought only \$1.50. If he could get any loads at all.

As the construction work slowed to a trickle, Tom tried the docks. Where he had established relationships with certain warehouses, it was every man for himself at the docks, which used the “shape up” system of hiring. The work was very unpredictable, with men and carts waiting for the signal that a ship was arriving.



Then they all waited while the cargo was offloaded by stevedores before the cartmen got their chance to swoop in to cart off the piles to different warehouses. He felt sorry for the men who were left with empty carts. They were worse off than he was.

The Depression hit everyone. Tim was complaining about the trouble he was having keeping his customers. “True gentlemen like

Judge Daly are staying with their tailors. They have no time to be bothered shopping for ready-made suits.” Even the ready-made business was falling off, he added. “Look at the unsold suits. I’m glad I haven’t made any coats yet.” Tom couldn’t help but notice that Bridget’s waist coats too were unsold.

It was a bad time for all, and misery loves company. After he had put the horses away for the day, Tom dropped by O’Brien’s, the neighborhood grog shop/grocery, looking for some cheer. Mick O’Neill, the neighborhood freeloader, was there, holding forth with his endless supply of Irish jokes, usually starring himself.



“So Mick staggered home in the wee small hours after a heavy night out with his mates. When he woke up the next morning, he found he was in bed with the dog beside him in his wife's place.

"Glory be!" said Mick. " I must have been really drunk when I got home. I thought there was a lot of noise when I threw the dog out!"

Tom bought him a pint, although he’d heard that one before. After Mick had polished that off, he was ready for another.

“So a wife was in bed with her lover and had just told him how stupid her Irish husband was when the door was thrown open and there stood Mick. He glared at her lover and bellowed, ‘What are you doing?’

‘There,’ said the wife, ‘didn’t I tell you he was stupid?’”

“We’ve heard that one before, Mick. You’ll get nothing for that one.”

Mick scratched his head; he had already had three or four pints and didn’t really need another, but finally remembered a good one.

“So Michael Hoolihan was courtin’ Frances Phelan. Night after night, they sat in her parlor, much to the annoyance of old man Phelan.

One night he couldn’t take any more. Standing at the top of the stairs, he yelled down, ‘What’s that young fella doin’ here all hours of the night?’

‘Why, Da,’ said Frances, ‘Michael’s just been tellin’ me everything that’s in his heart!’

"Well, next time, " roared the old man, "just let him tell you what's in his head, and it won't take half as long!"

“Next time tell that one on yourself, Mick,” they told him, and bought him another.

While Thomas was spending a shilling at O’Brien’s, Bridget was trying to save a shilling on flour. A sack of flour now cost almost twice as much as the previous

year, since the wheat crop had been destroyed by the plague of Hessian flies. She bargained with grocers, searched for vendors who sold for less, bought from street sellers, women poorer than herself who grew their own vegetables and sold them off carts.

While Bridget was cutting back, she was coping in her own way. The birth of her son Will had opened her mind. She began dreaming of a beautiful future for Will. She was no longer nursing him—he was over a year old now, but she still carried him in a sling around her shoulders and loved to sit and watch him as he drank from his bottle, his eyes fixed upon her. She spoke to him, “You will not be poor like we are. You will be educated like your father, only you would be able to use your education. The country of your birth is Amerikay, and it will offer you more than it had offered your father, for you are not an “alien” as he is, but a “native.” You will get an education, go to law school, and become a judge like Mr. Daly. Maybe you and Mrs. Daly’s Willie will go to the same law school; you are only two years apart. You may even be friends—you already met once—after your christening.”

All these plans for him must have alarmed Will for he began crying. He cried a lot, she noticed. She went to find *The Mother Book* for advice. With Helena, who was a happy child, she hadn’t needed it and had laid it aside, but Will needed more attention.

“An infant’s wants should be attended to without waiting for him to cry. At first a babe cries merely from a sensation of suffering because food warmth or other comforts necessary to his young existence are withheld, but when he finds crying is the only means of attracting attention, he soon gets in the habit of crying for everything. To avoid this, his wants should be attended to, whether he demand it or not. Food, sleep, and necessary comforts should be supplied to him at such times as the experience of his mother may dictate. If he has been sitting on the floor playing quietly by himself a good while, take him up and amuse him. If you can spare time without waiting for weariness to render him fretful. Who can blame a child for fretting and screaming if experience has taught him that he cannot get his wants attended to in any other manner?”

The words made her feel guilty. What needs was she not attending to? She smiled at him, blew on his nose, tickled him, but he only cried the more. She bounced him up and down; he sobbed relentlessly. Helena stood nearby watching, her head to one side. “Lena is here, Willie,” she told him. “Lena, your big sister—see her?” She held him so that Lena was right before him, but he struggled away from her. He was so fretful, but she had no more time. She had to get supper. She wrapped the long shawl around him and bound him to her waist, then carried him along outside to get water, propped him beside her on the shawl as she sat on the back yard stoop peeling potatoes and cutting cabbages and carrots for their evening stew. Helena sat across from her, handing her the potatoes. Gradually Will’s sobbing stopped and before long he was asleep. “I guess he was just weary,” she told Helena, who smiled. “It’s hard times for us all.”

That evening after supper Tim took Tom outside, out of earshot of their wives.

“Tom, I know you’re having a hard time like I am, and I know it’s not easy coming up with \$8 a month, but you can see that tailoring is not what it was last year when I had Andy here with me and was dreaming of taking on more help and expanding the shop. I don’t see how I can keep up with the \$50 a month that the owner charges here--\$600 a year. I’m behind in my rent as it is, and the only reason he hasn’t turned us out is that he couldn’t find another renter, in these times, and he’d rather keep me in here, accumulating debt. I’m worried that we’ll be turned out if he gets a better tenant; I might end in the debtor’s prison.

Tom couldn’t agree and he couldn’t disagree, so he just stated his case. “I’m lucky to earn nine dollars a week, Tim. Feed for the two horses costs nearly three dollars a week, and anything extra like horse-shoes and wear and tear could raise that to \$3.50 or \$4. I feel guilty paying you only two dollars a week, though we do share many household expenses, including food. Things are bound to improve soon.” His optimism was undimmed.

The matter had been broached, but no solution had been reached.