

Part II Chapter 22 A Respectable Boarding House

Bridget was putting the children in bed for a nap one afternoon in late October when she heard Tim calling to ask her to come out front, that she had a visitor.

Peggy McGee was standing inside the entrance, her eyes cast down, looking embarrassed to have come. "Oh, Miss Bridget, thank God you're home. I need to talk to someone. I need advice. Please, can I come in?"

Bridget led her into the back room, where they could speak privately, and kept her voice low so that Helena couldn't hear. Helena heard and remembered everything.

"It's about me and Michael I've come."

Bridget knew that Michael and Peggy had continued to feel drawn to each other and spent time together whenever they could.

"I've had an offer of marriage."

Bridget smiled, but her smile faded when she saw that Peggy wasn't smiling.

"It's not from Michael, if that's what ye're thinking. It's from a man I met in my business." Bridget pretended not to know what that business might be. Peggy still had the same air of innocence that she had when she had first arrived five years ago. Bridget wondered if perhaps the "business" she had been in had gone over her head and she really did consider it a business.

"I want you to meet him. He's older, but he's settled and he runs a respectable boarding house--not like Mrs. Malloy's, no. He's kind and won't expect me to do any work for him. He wants to have children. He's the best man I've met. I want you to meet him and tell me what you think and help me break it to Michael. Don't bring Tom—I know he'll not be on my side."

So it was arranged that Betty would look after Lena, Will and Daniel for two hours the next afternoon, so that Bridget could meet Peggy's friend at the boarding house on Canal and Centre, on the north end of Five Points.

Peggy ushered her into the front parlor, which she said was Mr. Newman's own parlor, although the boarders could use it if they weren't rowdy and kept it nice. His boarders lived upstairs. "Mr. Newman will be right down. He's talking to a boarder."

When Mr. Newman walked in, Bridget was startled to see that he was a light-skinned African. He greeted her and asked her to be seated, then said,

“Peggy didn’t tell you that I’m black, did she?” Had Bridget’s surprise been that obvious?

“No doubt she wanted you to meet me, without being prejudiced. She told me that you had helped her when she first came and that you are the only woman she knows whose opinion she values, so I hope that you will form a favorable opinion of me.” His easy smile offset his formal manners, as Peggy sat looking respectfully at him and hopefully at Bridget.

Bridget had only briefly lived in Five Points, where there were many blacks living—in separate houses from whites—though they drank and even danced together in bars. Up until now she had never met any personally. She really knew nothing about them, except that they were very poor and most had been slaves in the South and all were at the bottom of the pile in New York, together with the Irish.

“You’re wondering how I come to own and run this boarding house. Let me tell you my story, Mrs. O’Shaughnessy.” Bridget smiled. She certainly would like to know how he came to be doing so well, although anyone who lived in Five Points could not really be doing well by her standards. She enjoyed the deferential tone that Mr. Newman employed with her, as if he respected her. No one had treated her with respect, except Mrs. Daly and the Daly’s staff.

“I was born on a tobacco plantation in North Carolina. My mother was a house slave—not a field slave in the tobacco fields. She was very pretty and well treated by the family. She couldn’t read or write, but she learned the white folks way.. When her mistress died in childbirth after her fifth daughter, my mother took over the raising of Mr. Newman’s motherless daughters. She fell naturally into running the house for the master. She was the Master’s comfort after his wife died. I was the child of his old age—his only son, but still a slave. My mother named me for him, although it was embarrassing to the rest of the family to hear her call me by his name, “Walter Frederick,” so I was called ‘Freddie.’”

“Thanks to my mother’s favorite position in the house, I was given responsibilities of a son—and steward, though I wasn’t recognized as his son by the daughters, who all married rich planters and moved out while I was growing up. My mother trained me well, saw to it that I learned to read and write, and saw to it that my master gave me my freedom when he died and enough money to start life as a free man with. The daughters inherited the plantation and my mother remained there.

“With my free papers and the inheritance, I came to New York. You know this is a place that doesn’t take kindly to black folks. Peggy said you used to live in this ward, so you’ve seen what happens to successful black business men. I was here in the riots of July, 1834, when the gangs moved up Centre Street. I was fortunately on the north side of Canal Street, and by then the mob had destroyed

to their hearts content, so let me go. Perhaps they don't know I exist—I try to keep it quiet around hers—no drinking on the premises.

“I want to settle down and raise a family. If I could move out of Five Points, I would. I can offer Peggy security and a home and a chance to raise a family, which is what she said she wants as much as I do.”

Bridget was amazed at his story. She knew nothing of plantation life, although the situation of the slaves sounded like what the Irish had under the English. She couldn't think of anything like “house slaves” under the English though—probably more like “field slaves.”

“Mr. Newman, I am amazed at your story. I know nothing of plantation life, although the way we Irish live under the English sounds like a form of it. My parents are cottiers—“ She stopped when she saw that Mr. Newman had never heard the word before.

“A cottier is a tenant farmer, a landless laborer. My father received a cabin and a small plot of ground in return for his labor on the owner's holding. A cottier might have a dry-cot--potato land only-- or a wet-cot--with additional land to support a cow depending upon the amount of yearly labor agreed upon. We have a wet cot, with one cow. Our cabin was cheaply erected by the owner on poor land, and in return my father is obliged to work for the farmer/owner, to till his land. As long as the potato crop remains plentiful, we cottiers are better off than our neighbors who work for cash. Moreover, our whole family can help and supply surplus labor. Normally women and children have no opportunity to work on farms except during harvest. The cot gives our whole family a means of turning the family's labor directly into food without the need for cash to rent land. But like slaves, we are dependent on our employers. We serve at their pleasure. There are no written agreements, so my father and our family have always been anxious to please the owner, in order to be sure we'll have employment from year to year. That's why we are eager to come to Americay, to escape that form of slavery.”

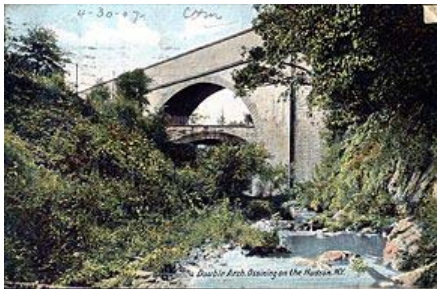
Bridget later told Peggy that she was quite impressed by Mr. Newman. “But what about Michael? I thought you and he—“

“Bridget, you know that Michael won't settle down until he gets his 'stake.' If he would ask me, of course it's him I'd choose, but I can't wait. Mr. Newman has made me an offer that a woman like me could never expect to receive. I want to leave the business I'm in. I want to live respectable, come up to his expectations of me. With Michael, it's like we're both on the same level, both hoping for someone to give us a hand up, but Mr. Newman wants to give me his hand and pull me up. Do you suppose I'll ever have this chance again? Do you think I'm right?”

“Oh, Peggy, you must do what you think is right, and not ask me; as you know I must side with Tom and Michael, but, if I weren’t married to Tom, and if Tom felt like Michael, even though it would break my heart to give up Tom, I’d see no other way.” What she meant was that a poor girl must always choose respectability over passion. “And I’m going to make sure my daughter doesn’t wait for an Irishman to get around to marrying.”

There was nothing for it but for Peggy to tell Michael, and the sooner the better, for Mr. Newman wanted them to be married before the New Year.

Bridget did not know how she told him, and she didn’t really know whether Michael had even told Tom the whole story, for Tom told her only the aftermath. “Michael’s leaving town. He’s heard from customers at the saloon that there are good wages to be had--work, in this bad time--on the Croton Reservoir and aqueduct. They’re bringing water down from the Croton River, damming it up in



Westchester, digging tunnels, building bridges, laying piping—iron inside of brick--to form an underground aqueduct—miles and miles of it, all the way down to us. Lots of carting jobs to be had, he says.” Bridget caught that and wasn’t surprised by what he said next.

“He’s going to have to live on the site—about 40 miles north. He wants me to come with him.”

Bridget shook her head. Let Michael cover up his heartbreak with this story of seizing a new opportunity further north, but let him not drag Tom along with him into the forests.

“You’re not going anywhere, Tom. You’re not a bachelor like your brother. You have three children and a wife to look after right here.”

Tom went on as though he hadn’t heard her. “Me and Michael will be a good team, with the horses able to pull big loads. It’s the best job available. We’ll take part in history. Hauling manure isn’t all that enjoyable; farmers don’t use manure in winter. This is our chance to earn some real money. We can both get a stake. Michael can get his saloon and we can save money for our family’s future.”

Bridget thought about it for days, while Tom continued to plead. “It’s been going on for 2 years, so they’re within 40 miles, and moving nearer all the time. I’ll be home for Sunday Mass. I’ll ride back and forth on Jackson and leave Dolly with Michael. He says he’s content to stay there. Nothing for him here, he says.”

Bridget saw that it was useless to say no. He had got the bug, as he did when he wanted to come to America. Better to let him get it out of his system. She could stay on with the Leary's, and Tom could come home on Saturday night.

But the Learys lives were changing too about the same time. Right after Tom left with Michael, Tim found a building for rent up in Greenwich Village and decided to close his shop on Fulton and relocate there. "The rent is less, and some of my best customers live further north. Well-off people are moving there to get away from the congestion and disease and filthy streets of Manhattan. They don't have pigs running in the streets up there."

He had taken out a loan of \$200 to pay off the present landlord and have enough to fix up the new place. "Bridget, you and Tom will always be welcome, but there won't be room for both our families, as I plan to get a helper. I may get into the Southern trade—with the plantation owners—they don't have the clothing industry there that we have." Bridget didn't know what he meant—she might ask Mr. Newman where the Southerners got their clothes.

"Maybe after Tom gets his stake, he will want to live in Greenwich Village too. When you visit us, you can see Mrs. Daly too and make a day of it. It'll be a chance to get away."

"Yes, yes," Lena, who was listening as usual, said. Bridget knew she would miss Nell, who was like a big sister to her, and there was always Willie with his wonderful rocking horse.

The problem was that Bridget had no other place to move to herself with her children. Tom was away, so she set out looking and immediately thought of the Newman's place, which had impressed her as orderly and that fact that no drinking was allowed on the premises was a strong inducement. Mr. Newman was in his early forties, she thought, and seemed like someone who had been around. She remembered his way of speaking to her and felt that it was the first time anyone had sought her good opinion. She would certainly do everything she could for him and Peggy and perhaps, in return, she might board there until Tom would have enough to find them a better place, outside of Five Points.

So Bridget found herself back in Five Points, but in a different atmosphere from the house Mrs. Malloy ran. All tenants were African-Americans—all poor like herself, though Mr. Newman only rented to tenants who were employed. "If they lose their jobs or don't pay their rent, they're out." Bridget hoped she wouldn't be turned out.