

Part II Chapter 23 My Country 1840

Mr. Newman had found a room for her and her family of three children-- and Tom, when he occasionally came home, which he didn't, once the roads became snow covered, until Christmas, when he bought money (enough to pay the rent for half the year, he bragged—the rent was only \$4 a month) and the cart, with sled runners. He announced that Michael would be staying with them, long enough to have Christmas dinner, at least. And best of all, he promised, they could go for a sleigh ride!

Bridget had so many things to tell him that she carried on a non-stop conversation about what had been happening.

“Daniel is going to be tall like your family. . . New York has been empty without you. . . Three children are a handful. . . Will especially . . . He wants his way, wants to sleep in bed with me. Can you tell him that he must share the mattress with Lena?”

Tom was trying to oblige Lena, who had missed her father and now wanted to sit on his lap, but Will stepped forward, demanding to be taken for a piggy-back ride.

“I miss the privacy we had at the Learys' place, Tom. Only the Learys knew our business there; here, everyone does. People pop in and want to talk, especially because of the children. They're the only children in the building—most of these people are single, and older—Mr. Newman says he doesn't want 'unsettled youngsters.' Some of his boarders have been here a long time—children are a novelty, especially white children. One of them told me she had taken care of a child just as much trouble as Will. She offered to look after him some afternoon and 'train him some manners.' She laughed.

“I've been trying to school Lena—teaching her to read, from *The Mother Book*, my only book. It's too hard, though she wants to please so much that she doesn't complain. Maybe if I could buy a primer? I want to have her ready when it's time for school next year. She remembers waiting for Nell to come home from school and show her what she learned.”

Bridget couldn't stop talking—It seemed like she never had a chance to talk to Tom any more.

“It's like a carnival around here in Five Points—even crazier than before. Sailors, loafers and vagabonds hang around outside porterhouses on the way—You've seen them. I hate to go grocery shopping—the way they look at a woman alone. And I have to watch for petty thieves. The other afternoon, I swatted off a boy trying to snatch my purse from me.”

No response from Tom. His attention was monopolized by Will, who was reaching up to his father pleading to be swung in the air.

“Everyone fights around here! The Irish fight the Irish; the blacks the blacks, the “natives” fight the Irish and the blacks--so far I haven’t seen the Irish fight with the blacks. Women fighting women, men fighting men. If an Irish woman and a black man walk down the street together --well, they’re asking for insults.”

Tom was tickling Will, and when he stopped and looked toward Bridget at that last remark, Will demanded more tickling.

“No one cleans up around here. Pigs, horses, pig sties, stables--manure and garbage everywhere, and and no one cleans up but the pigs. Mr. Newman tries to keep his premises clean. You saw the boards he put in front of his boarding house leading to the door, but it’s a losing battle.”

Tom didn’t answer this complaint either. He was trying to separate Lena and Will. Lena was trying to push Will away so that she could get on her father’s lap and show him her drawing.

“What is there for small children to do in this neighborhood? See how desperate they are for amusement?”

“How long can I take this? I regret I ever agreed to let you work out of town.”

“You sound like you’ve been living in Five Points for years.”

She laughed. ‘Aside from this, though, I can’t complain.’

She enjoyed the inquisitive neighbors, actually. They were a diversion from a day spent looking after children, preparing their food, washing their clothes, trying to get them to bed. After she had gotten her complaints off her chest, she began telling Tom about the neighbors.

“There’s old Mr. Reynolds living on the top floor—he’s supported by his daughter, who lives ‘in another establishment,’ he says. He says he’d rather live here, or perhaps, she’d rather he lives here, as she probably doesn’t want him to see the way she supports herself there. He says she visits him on Sundays and pays his rent. Will wandered up there one morning and into Mr. Reynolds room. When he said, ‘And who are you?’ What do you suppose Will answered? ‘I’m a chieftain.’ He thinks that’s what he’s supposed to say when anyone asks that question.”

Tom laughed. Will repeated it, loudly, with emphasis. “I’m a chieftain!” He could pronounce it clearly now.

“There’s a nice lady seamstress here, too. Her son is in prison. She visits him every Sunday, taking a box of food, for she says he gets nothing to eat. I’ve showed her my fancy whitework. She says she gets no opportunity to do anything fancy, though she’d like to learn.”



That reminded her that she wanted to show him the fancy silk and lace tippet she was making for Peggy’s wedding outfit.

Peggy’s wedding would be two days after Christmas, when Tom and Mike were still here. “What do you plan to do about that? If Michael comes for Christmas dinner, won’t he risk seeing Peggy? That might be distressing to both of them—Don’t you know that?”

Tom wasn’t thinking about hurt feelings; he wanted a hearty family get-together on Christmas, surrounded by the only family he had here. “It’ll be fine, Bridget. You’ll see.”



Perhaps Tom knew something that Bridget didn’t know. For on Christmas Eve, the children had hung their stockings on their door, hoping that St. Nicholas would leave presents there. They were nearly asleep when they heard a commotion outside. The door flung open and there he was—“St. Nicholas!” the children shrieked. He was dressed in very funny clothes, but there was no mistaking his long beard. Lena and Will rushed to him. St. Nicholas handed Helena a toy and a rattle to Baby Daniel.

“And for you, Will, I’m sorry to say that I’m going to have to give you—a piece of COAL!” A terrible wail could be heard throughout the boarding house.

They all laughed, and St. Nick gave him a toy too, and he quieted down. Off went St. Nick, down the hall. Not too much later, in walked, “Uncle Michael!”

The next day Tom and Michael took the two children for a sleigh ride which became a cart ride, for the streets were tamped down with sand by then, and the sled runners couldn’t slide on the snowy slushy muck, so the wheels were put back on. Bridget remained home with Baby Daniel and looked after a small goose in the downstairs oven.

The marriage of Mr. Walter Frederick Newman of Five Points, formerly of North Carolina, and Peggy McGee, also of Five Points, formerly of Ireland, took place in St. Philip Episcopal African on Center Street on December 27.

The whole O’Shaughnessy family, except for Michael, who had gone back to the worksite, walked the few blocks down Centre Street to the church, rebuilt after

the riots with Dolly and the cart. Bridget had prevailed upon Tom to join her to be official witnesses. “She needs our moral support,” Bridget whispered. “This is the least we can do for her; she has no one else.” When he scowled, she added, “Think of how she can thumb her nose at Mrs. Malloy now!”

Not every story of unfortunate woman turned out so happily, Bridget knew. One day, she had come across Bessie, sitting outside a building, with a baby on her lap. She looked much older than 22, which she surely must be by now. Had she become a prostitute again? She had had another child.

“Miss Bridget, oh dear. I’m so glad to see you. It’s been so long. As you see, I have one that’s survived, and I’m not having nothing to do with the Magdalens. They know about Lulu and tried to get me to give her up, but I’m not. I’m keeping her and nursing her myself. I’m not trusting her to another soul.”

Bridget thought that Lulu looked as though she though she might have done better with the Magdalens, and might not make it despite her mother’s good intentions—She looked the way Lena had when she had the bad flu that winter. .

“Bessie, it’s too cold outside to be sitting with your baby. Can’t you take her inside where it’s warm? She looks sick. “

“She’s hot, Miss Bridget. Feel her forehead. It’s cool out here for her. There ain’t no heat inside neither. You think she’s sick?”

Bridget couldn’t think what she could do for Bessie. She feared the baby wouldn’t survive. All she could think of to say was “Take her to Mrs. Daly, Bessie. She remembers how kind you were to Willie. She has a new baby herself now and may be touched by the sight of her. Ask her to fetch a doctor. Here’s a shilling to take the omnibus and another to come back home.” She watched as Bessie gathered her shawl around her and the baby and walked toward the stop. Oh, that Mrs. Daly knows what to do, she prayed.

Later, when she saw Mrs. Daly, she asked about Bessie.

“Bessie never came to me, Bridget. Oh, I hope her child made it.”

The summer of 1840 was a momentous one for Tom and Bridget. They would become citizens on July 4. Tom felt that he really was getting a stake now, making progress at last toward their dreams. He was working every day on the Croton aqueduct, which had advanced to within a few miles of the city and was expected to be open by the following summer.

Michael had become a citizen several years earlier and was guiding them through the process of applying and proving that they had resided in the US for the minimum five years. He had told them the types of questions that would likely be asked, and as a result Bridget had undertaken a study of America's short history, enlisting the help of Lena, who could recognize enough words to read the questions and even supply the answers to ones her mother missed. She offered her father help too, but he decided it would be enough if one of them knew the answers.

Michael was their sponsor at the swearing in ceremony, and the two children stood at attention as their parents swore allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, saying the words along with them--"to the United States of America." Daniel smiled and Will behaved. Otherwise he wouldn't get to see the thousand ships and fireworks in the harbor, which Lena had told him she had seen, when she was only five. He had seen it too, but didn't remember it at all.

Also becoming a citizen on that day but not celebrating with them, because Michael still couldn't bear to see her, was Peggy Newman. Watching her proudly was her husband Mr. Newman, who was not a citizen, however, so Tom later questioned him. "But you were born here, and now you're married to a US citizen-- doesn't either one of those mean you can become a citizen?"

"I need \$250, which I do not have," Newman said, and let it go at that. Tom didn't understand, but he liked Newman. He couldn't call him "Mr. Newman," as Bridget did. (She remained "Mrs. O'Shaughnessy" to him.) Two men should call each other by their first names. What could he call him? "Call me 'Walter' or even 'Walter Frederick,' anything but 'Freddie,'" Tom thereafter called him "Freddie," and got away with it.