

Part II Chapter 24 Street Scenes



COME OUT YOU OLD LADIES
WITH YOUR BALD HEADED BABIES!
HERE COME THE BUTCHER!
BRING OUT YOUR DISHPAN!
LAMBCHOPS A SCHILLING A POUND!

“Hello, Mrs. O’Shaughnessy,” Mr. Brown greeted her. It always pleased her when tradesmen—spoke to her by name, in a friendly, yet respectful way. Bridget had taken Helena who was six and had started school at St. Mary’s on Grand Street. She took the opportunity to shop for food on the way home with William and Daniel, whom she was carrying.

“No, don’t touch anything, Will. No, not the knife, Will!”

“What’ll it be, Mrs. O?” The butcher retrieved the knife that Willie was reaching for. She knew nothing about the butcher, and he knew nothing about her. In Ireland, she would have known him, his wife and his family, where he lived, how many children he had, and any bit of bad luck that might have befallen him. Here she knew only that Mr. Brown appeared on this corner of the market each morning with his cart, staying until all his goods were sold or darkness fell. Where he lived, she had no idea and never made it her business to ask. She liked her privacy and she gave others theirs.

“Want something special? Is your husband coming home? I’ve set aside a nice piece of meat for you.”

She studied the piece he showed her—“Nice” indeed! Fat and gristle, with a few bits of flesh. Somehow the butcher had figured out, probably from the fact that she always asked for any left-over cuts, any ends to add flavor and stock to a stew when her husband was coming home, that she was poor and couldn’t afford anything decent. “The Croton Aqueduct and Reservoir will be finished and open by next spring; then my husband will be home for good.”

“Mrs. O, you can have it for a schilling.”

“Here’s six pence.” She was torn between wanting not to appear poor, and knowing that as a woman alone, she must stand her ground and not be taken advantage of. He shrugged and wrapped it up for her.

She didn’t like people knowing that she was in sole charge of the three children during these long separations. Back home people would have had something

to say about her letting her husband go off to work, leaving her with three children to care for. She never mentioned this separation in her letters home, never wrote her parents anything but good news. Here people knew nothing about her—didn't know her story unless she told them, which she seldom did. She didn't want them to form any judgments about her here, about her absent husband, about how poor they were, with perhaps another on the way. Back home people knew entirely too much about her. Her history there went back to before she was born. She was Billy and Rosie's little girl Bridget, who, after all they'd done for her--securing a place for her in a school where she could learn to be a lady's maid or governess-- what did she do? Threw it away to run off with a poor seminary fellow, and kept him from becoming a holy priest in the bargain!

WHAT AM I BID? WHAT AM I BID?
TABLES AND CHAIRS-- WHAT AM I BID?
DRESSERS AND BEDS—WHAT AM I BID?
WHAT AM I BID?

“Mama, look!” Will had stopped to watch an auctioneer selling someone's furnishings. She paused herself to watch. What on earth had happened to those poor people, she wondered, that they had to lose their home and all their goods? And valuables at that! A mirrored dresser, a stove, bed, chairs, tables, pictures, tools, clothes—all testifying to a life more prosperous than theirs.



It was too painful to watch, so she moved on. “Come along, Will.”

Might she and Tom become so destitute that they could be thrown out and lose everything? She was grateful that Mr. Newman their landlord understood poverty himself, and knew that Tom was a reliable worker, even though he was often late in sending the rent, especially during the winter when he mightn't come home with the rent money for months, leaving her struggling to buy food.

ROOT-BEER! ROOT-BEE-AR!
GET YOURSELF A DRINK!
FIVE CENTS A GLASS
ROOOOT-BEEEE-AAR!

“Mama, I'm thirsty. I want a drink.” Will had stopped in front of the root beer seller's stand, pointing to the colorful cart. Willie's commands went on continually. He could often wear her down. “Not now, Willie. Mama's got more shopping to do. Back home, she'll make you some nice warm tea.”



“I don’t want tea. I want root beer!” He began to sob as if someone had injured him.

“Will, if you don’t stop crying like a baby, we’re going home this minute.” He quieted down. She knew he liked walking about and seeing the city. She did too. He resembled her in that way. He was restless and needed stimulation and activity and always wanted to be outdoors. Outside he wanted to interact with the people on the street, even though he was only four. He liked to talk to people—he was like his father in that.



CHARCOAL BY THE BUSHEL
CHARCOAL BY THE PECK
CHARCOAL BY THE FRYING PAN
OR ANY WAY YOU LEK!

Willie heard the cry of the charcoal seller and ran toward the cart to watch him measuring out the blackened wood.

They walked on. She loved walking in the city, listening to the vendors’ cries with Will, enjoying the privacy and anonymity while feeling part of the larger life of a big city. In the beginning she had been lonely here, where she knew no one and no one knew her, when only Mrs. Daly and her servants had been her friends. She had learned to keep her secrets even there, especially after Mr. Daly dismissed any idea of finding Tom suitable work when he heard he had studied to be a priest. Somehow, in the midst of having children and working, she had adjusted to life in New York, and now liked the pace. It was alive and moving forward. People here got things done—perhaps not in Five Points, but Five Points was an island. Outside, in the rest of the city—the port, the harbor, the financial district—people were moving ahead. Activity was in the air, especially now that it was fall. This was the place for people with big plans. Back in Ireland, men spent a lot of time talking about their big plans but they did little about them. Women hadn’t the leisure to dream, of course, but the men were great dreamers. In New York, people didn’t spend much time talking. Everybody worked—the constant sounds of pick and shovel, the shouts of men, the steady rumble of horses, carriages and carts were exciting and stimulating. This was no place to be lazy. She and Tom were moving forward. They were New Yorkers.

MEEE-LECK COME!
MEEE-LECK COME!
HERE’S NEW MILK FROM THE COW!
SO SWEET AND SO FINE
THAT DOCTORS DO SAY
’TIS BETTER THAN WINE!



“Milkman, milkman!” Willie cried, running toward the wagon heading up Centre to turn onto Canal, their street. “Take me for a ride!” He loved all vendors with carts, especially horse drawn carts. He often asked for rides. Sometimes he was lucky.

“No, Willie, the milkman has work to do to deliver milk to us. You like fresh milk, don’t you? He hasn’t time to stop and play or take you for a ride!” Would Willie have been as entranced with the cow back in Ireland as he was with the milk man on Centre Street? Imagine—milk delivered right to their door. All they needed was money.

The horse trotted on.

After a snack for lunch, Bridget put the boys down for naps, leaving them in the care of Mr. Reynolds. In return for looking after the boys while she picked up Lena from school, Mr. Reynolds was invited for supper. Even on days when there was no school, he usually wandered in, as the O’Shaughnessys were the only relief from his otherwise monotonous life. Theirs was the only family with children in Newman’s Lodging house, and the sight of the bounding boys or the serious Lena usually put a smile on the faces of other lodgers.

That evening as Bridget was preparing stew in the kitchen, Peggy commented, “Why don’t we all eat together, like we did at Mrs. Malloys.”

Bridget was surprised that Peggy had any positive memories of her years living at Mrs. Malloys.

“You know you’re always welcome to eat with us, Bridget.” Bridget hoped Peggy wasn’t feeling sorry for her, seeing the sorry pieces of meat that she added to her stews.

The next day, there was a new sign in the entrance hall:

MEAL PLAN -Mon-Sat Buffet
BREAKFAST- 5-7 a.m., 1 shilling;
DINNER 8-10 p.m.- 2 shilling.
Children: under 12, half price. Under 3 eat free.
Common Room

Peggy’s idea had borne fruit. Mr. Newman thought dining together was an idea worth trying. It would help build community. Those who wished and had the time could eat together, sharing the costs. Most of the lodgers were service employees—cleaners, porters, scullery, domestics—who usually left for work early and returned home late, so meals were adjusted.

Bridget didn't know how this would affect the children, especially Will, who did not know how to behave in company, as they seldom had any, except Mr. Reynolds and Peggy, and occasionally Michael.

She fed the children breakfast after most of the others had left, and had just enough time to walk Lena to St. Mary's where classes started at 8.

That evening at supper she saw that the children were cleaned up—Lena took Will and Bridget Dan, and they joined the others who had arrived at 8.

Will was delighted—everyone knew him and he recognized them but didn't know any names. Bridget introduced her children around to those whose names she knew and Peggy introduced them to those she didn't know. They were mostly domestics like herself at the Daly's, who didn't live in—house cleaners and seamstresses, who could leave work by five or six.

"Master Will," Mr. Reynolds called him, and the name stuck with. Bridget laughed, as that was the name she and the other domestics at the Daly's called Willie Daly. "Master Will" indeed.

Finding himself liked by everyone, Will felt free to move about the table and engage the others. Mrs. Elroy, the seamstress whose son was in jail, put her arm around him and hugged him. Seeing he had won her affection, Will snatched a piece of food from her plate. She looked surprised but said nothing. When he saw that he had gotten away with it once, he tried it again. This time she stopped him before he could snatch it. "No, Master Will. This is my plate. This is my food. You have your own plate."

Bridget was surprised. Will was used to acting this way among the family members and everyone let him. Did he assume that everyone who showed him affection was his family, to be ordered about? Maybe this is what he needs, she thought.

The next time he saw Mrs. Elroy, he said to her, "You said 'No.'"

"Yes, Master Will. I said 'No.'"