

II-25 Lena Goes to School



Lena was going to school at last! Ever since she could remember she had wanted to be like Nell who could go to school every day and learn to read and write. Fortunately her mother was able to read and worked with her even when they moved to the boarding house, so when Lena was finally old enough, she was ahead of most of the others, few of whose parents could read.

Because St. Mary's Church on Grand Street had a free school for girls Bridget and Tom had attended Mass there, since moving to the Newman's Boarding house. Originally classes had been held in the basement, but so many new members had been added that another congregation was forming from the German immigrants, who used the basement for a chapel while waiting for their own church to be built. Girls' classes were now held in two rooms adjoining the choir loft, under the bell towers. Classes were taught by several Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg, Md.

Bridget had made Lena a new dress to wear to school, but when Lena saw the simple dresses of the others girls-- whose mothers couldn't sew, she told her mother that she preferred to wear her everyday dress and save the new dress for Sundays.

Lena was surprised to realize that she was ahead of most of the girls in reading and soon found she was a favorite of the teacher, who especially liked to display her whenever Father William Quarter, the pastor, or Father McGuire, the assistant, stopped by to check up on their catechism class. Sister Rose Marie would ask Lena to come up and read the question from the catechism, and wait for someone to answer. The girls were usually tongue-tied in front of the pastor, so Lena would be asked to read the answer. Lena would get flustered and found that it was easier just to memorize the Catechism lesson in case one of the priests came in and she got called on.

"By the end of the year, you'll have the catechism memorized," Bridget smiled, as she listened to her recitals in the evening.

"Sister says we **all** should memorize the Catechism," Lena replied gravely.

Lena could barely wait to get to school each morning, to be away from Will's importunities and her mother's needs. School was a place where she felt free and could talk with friends her own age. At home there were only adults or babies.

“Is your father a hod carrier? Mine is,” one girl asked her, not knowing what a hod carrier was.

“No he drives a wagon with two horses!”

“Oooh!” The girls listened with envy, so she hastened to reassure them that it wasn’t as wonderful as it sounded. “But he’s usually away. He works out of town.”

“Oh!” The other girls faces conveyed sympathy, and she couldn’t have that either, so changed the subject.

“We live in a boarding house with a man who was a **slave!**”

“Oh???” Questioning looks met this declaration “What’s a slave?”

Lena was surprised they didn’t know. She knew; she had heard Mr. Newman’s story more than once. “His father owned his mother and him and kept them locked up.”

“In a dungeon?”

“Probably just at night. During the day they did all his work for him, like servants.”

“I never heard of locking servants in a dungeon.”

“My mother’s a servant. I’ll ask her if there’s a dungeon for the servants who stay overnight. She doesn’t have to stay at night.”

“Only slaves are locked in dungeons at night.”

“Why?”

“So they can’t escape.”

“What if they escape?”

“They’ll get shot.” Lena was finding her knowledge of slavery was limited to this one case.

“Did the slave in your house escape and get shot?”

“No. His father let him go. He’s not a slave anymore.”

“Did his father let all his servants go?”

“No, just him, I guess. Not even his mother. She’s still a slave, he said.”

No one understood that, but she was the expert.

“Did she want to stay with his father?”

Fortunately, Sister came into the room before she could try to explain why his father was dead and then let him go. Lena would have to find out about slavery before she could talk about it again.

Sister Elizabeth Ann came into class one morning with an announcement.

“Bishop Hughes will be speaking, about Catholic education in New York at the City Hall on October 28-30. He hopes for a big turnout from the Catholic community to support him. I want all you girls to remember the time and place and tell your parents as soon as possible so you won’t forget. It’s very important.”

Lena didn’t need to be encouraged to tell her mother something important. She loved feeling important, and school frequently offered her the chance.

“Sister says that the Bishop wants you to come to the City Hall October 28-30 to hear him talk about Catholic education.”

Bridget didn’t know what on earth Lena was referring to, so the next morning she made it a point to seek out one of the sisters before school and ask what meeting she meant.

“Oh, Mrs. O’Shaughnessy, I’m sure you or your husband will want to come. There’s to be a conference those days to try to get more money for the Catholic schools.”

Bridget knew nothing of this, and in a rush, Sister tried to explain to her what the situation was. “The aldermen are meeting on Wednesday through Friday of the last week of October to talk about public education in New York. You know that free public education is guaranteed to all the children of New York since 1805. Money was allocated to all schools serving the children and was under the “Free School Society,” but gradually leaders changed that only to public schools administered by the Public School Society of New York. Since the money comes from *all* the people through taxes, and the law says that the Society is ‘to provide for the education of *all children* not otherwise provided for’ shouldn’t our eight schools receive money too? There’s a petition, supported by Governor Seward, asking the Council to consider giving a share of the money to our poor schools as well. You know the poor conditions we have here---so many girls crowded up here in the organ loft, with only a few books which all the students must share,

while the public schools have regular school buildings and regular text books—biased against Catholics as the petition points out, so why should our children have to study them? The Public School Society is now controlled by intolerant sectarian ministers, and I have my doubts that the Council will grant it, but the Bishop is a great speaker and his speech will be a one you or your husband won't want to miss."

Bridget left promising that she would try. When Lena raised the question again that evening, Bridget told her that she couldn't possibly leave the children alone to go out for who knows how long it might take or when it might come up in the Council. Moreover, she wasn't feeling well.

"Mama is going to have another baby, darling."

Lena was excited, then asked, "Are you going to have a girl or a boy?"

"We'll have to wait and see. It will be a surprise!"

"I want a girl." She had had enough of little brothers, but kept that to herself.

At dinner table one evening, Lena asked Mr. Newman about slavery. "Were the slaves kept in dungeons?"

Some of those at the table looked embarrassed at the question.

"Not exactly, Lena. Why do you want to know?"

"At school we were talking about what a slave was, and I couldn't explain it. Were you locked in a dungeon?"

"I wasn't, but then, I was a house slave. But we could be locked up if we tried to escape or if we revolted.

"Were you locked up?" For some reason, she wanted to know the grisly details.

"Not me. My mother looked out for me and protected me. But maybe someone else was." He looked around, as if inviting someone to contribute to this lesson.

"I been locked up." It was old Mr. Reynolds, who was usually said anything, as he was hard of hearing.

Everyone looked at him. "You, Mr. Reynolds?" Bridget was surprised, but the others had heard his story before.

“Yes, when I was a young nigger, I wouldn’ stand for nobody messin’ wit’ me, you see, and wouldn’t settle down, even after I’s beaten, so the overseer shackled me up and took me to market and put me up on the slave auction block. . . .”

No one said anything, so Mr. Reynolds went on. “And I’s sold to a man who was e’en worse than my other master, a slave-breaker he claimed he was, but I stood up to him, I did; yes I stood my ground—“ He paused, then continued, “I was locked in a wood shed, and wasn’t given no food or water. My life wa’nt worth nothin’ anyways, so I just told the Lord to take me, and atter three-four days . . .”,

“You escaped?” Lena asked hopefully. Even Will was listening attentively.

“No, but a chain was put round my neck, and I was put on a cart and taken back to the auction market and that ol’ slave-breaker said he couldn’ do nothin’ wit’ me and demanded his money back—he must’ve given a lot for me and didn’t want to lose it all. By that time I wasn’t looking too good, so the only one to buy me was a poor man who said I wa’nt worth nothin’, so he wa’nt gonna pay but \$40 for me.”

“That’s what a horse would cost,” Bridget said.

“That’s nothing for a slave. Slaves’re a lot more valuable than horses,” Mr. Newman commented.

“So I was taken off to this poor man’s plantation back in the hollers. He wa’nt much of a worker—no wonder he ‘s poor. He wants me to do all the work—plow the fields, plant the corn, bring in the harvest, while he was moonshinin’ around.”

“What’s moonshinin’?” Lena asked.

“Makin’ moonshine—corn whiskey. He had him a still in the barn where he made whiskey from corn mash.”

“Nice thing about working for that man, though. He drink his own hooch and then pay me no mind, so got time to look around. I find he’s got him a gal keepin’ house—a slave gal. She ‘n me, we sort’a took to each other. She like she waitin’ for someone to take her away from that man, so when I arrives, she gets real nice to me, then shows me ways we can escape. There wa’nt many patrollers back in the hollers, so when the corn’s all planted and it’s late in the summer and nothin’ to do but wait till it’s ready to harvest, her and me plans to escape.”

“How’d you escape?”

“That’s a story for another night, Lena,” Bridget interrupted. “Let Mr. Reynolds finish his dinner, and you finish yours.”

