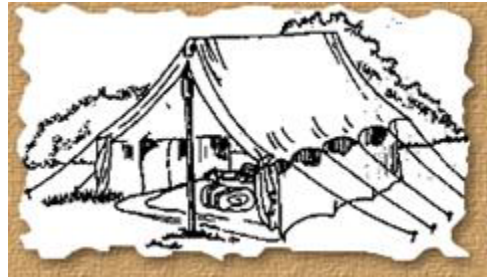


Part II Chapter 26 Thomas Turns Thirty

Thomas returned late Sunday night from his Sunday visit home. It was the last weekend in October. Michael was already back in their tent, stretched out on his bed roll.



“Well, you’ll be relieved to know our wages were lowered again—back to 75 cents a day—with a shilling each for a horse with a wagon. Feed provided--for man and beast.”

“Welcome back, Tom. I’ve some fine news for you on your 30th birthday!”

“I knew you’d be pleased.”

“I should have stayed home. I suppose we’ll be striking again?” Tom began taking off his boots and coat and stripping to his longjohns.

“Why not? We’ve nothing to lose. At least we’ll all stick together on this one.”

“Anything else I missed? Any fights with the brave men of Fermanagh?”

“You didn’t miss any fun this time. You never join the fights anyway.”

“I always ask myself, ‘Is this why you came, Tom, to fight with the Orangemen just like you could’ve done back home?’ Do you ever remember me fighting them back home?”

“Well you could hardly get at them there, unless you went up north, could you? Here there’re on the same work crew with you.”

“If I’d a known those damned Orangemen would follow us around, I never would’ve come on this job.”

“Hard to keep away from them. I see you’ve lost your green ribbon again.”

“You know, every time they give us a new one, I mislay it.”

“How’ll anyone know where you’re from?”

“Keep ‘em guessing. Maybe I’m a spy. How’s Dolly?”

“She’s eating well, but she’s not a spring chicken.”

“Good thing this job’ll be done next spring—“

“That’s another piece of news for you on your birthday, Tom. There are rumors that the work’ll go on another year, that we’re behind schedule. .”

“Ye’re just full of happy surprises tonight. Maybe it’s because of these strikes.”

“Building the High Bridge over the Harlem River is expected to take years beyond that. There’s work here for a good long time, Tom, and I’m glad. I’ve no place to go.”



The High Bridge

“Well, Bridget isn’t going to like it. I told her it would be over by spring, when the new baby’s due. She still reminds me that I wasn’t there when Lena was born.”

“Maybe we can arrange to have a strike at that time. You can always leave.”

“And take Jackson? He does most of the work.”

“You could take Dolly. About time she had a vacation.”

“Take the old lady for a nice 20 mile trot?”

“Good night, Tom. Happy 30th birthday.”

“Good night, Mike, you old dosser. Oh, I almost forgot—Peggy’s expecting too.”

“Ah, you wouldn’t want to be forgetting that, now, would you?”

“I knew you’d be pleased. Maybe you could be the Godfather?”

“Eejit.” Mike pulled the blanket over his head.

On Tuesday, when another strike was indeed called to protest the lowering of the wages by the contractors and the strict rules in the camps, Tom took Jackson and rode him back into the city

“You’ll be able to attend the meeting at City Hall this week,” Bridget told him when he arrived. “According to Lena, ‘The Bishop says you must go.’”

Bishop Hughes was still only the coadjutor bishop of New York, under Bishop DuBois, but he was already a popular leader, noted for his pugnacity and fiery oratory. The school question had raised hackles on both sides, with

considerable momentum supplied from the press and the pulpits, mostly in opposition to giving the Catholics any share of the money to support “popery,” as Tom learned. A substantial following, Thomas learned, and some at the meeting had attended a series of meetings already chaired by him, during which the “school question” had been the topic, leading to the drawing up of the petition that would be presented. He felt he had been living off in the wilderness, while momentous things were happening back here in the city.

The Council Chamber was filled—beside the Board of Aldermen were the Board of Assistant Aldermen, The School Society were represented by two of its trustees, both noted lawyers, and a number of Protestant ministers who were going to speak against the petition. Bishop Hughes represented the petitioners, preferring to speak himself, even though his own education had been sparse, rather than entrust so important a case to an attorney,. . .The crowd in the Council Chamber was so large and so many filled the halls were lined that the participants had trouble getting through.

Bishop Hughes spoke first, for three hours. He asserted that the Public School Society was “a gigantic and growing monopoly,” that its schools were practically sectarian and its instructions so strongly biased in favor of Protestantism tht Roman Catholics, though taxed to support the schools, could not conscientiously send their children there. He pointed to places in text books distributed by the Public School Society that advanced the idea that the establishment of “popery” was the goal of the Church and Catholic education. He read statement after statement from texts that denigrated and maligned Catholicism. How could Catholic students sit through classes such as these, he asked. He said the Public School Society was composed of wealthy Protestant men who had step by step enlarged their sphere until they monopolized public funds for public education, which as recently as 1825 had been available for all. He was astonished, he said, that men of good intentions “would sooner see tens of thousands of poor children contending with ignorance and the companions of vice, rather than concede one iota of their monopoly in order that others may enjoy their rights.”

He was answered by one trustee, then another, refuting each in turn and seeming to enjoy the debate. Back and forth it went for several days, with the ultimate result that the Board referred the petition to a committee, where, Thomas learned in following up later, it would continue to be discussed for ten weeks. The committee would recommend visitation of both kinds of schools, and the report would find that in the public schools, books were numerous and the students were surprisingly proficient in arithmetic, geography, astronomy, reading, writing, while the Catholic schools were

“lamentably deficient in accommodations and supply of books and teachers. The rooms were all excessively crowded and poorly ventilated, the books much worn as well as deficient in numbers, and the teachers

not sufficiently numerous. Yet, with all these disadvantages, though not able to compete successfully with public schools, they exhibited a progress that was truly creditable, and with the same means at their disposal, they would doubtless soon be able to improve their condition.”

Finally, in January, their petition would be rejected by a vote of 15-1, after which they would appeal to Albany, where Governor Seward was a supporter.

While the strike wore on, Tom was able to stay in the city and follow it in the city papers. He learned that Mayor Isaac Varian tried to intimidate the strikers by calling out and leading three troops of aging mounted militia of the 27th Regiment of the National Guard. The spectacle was ridiculous, the papers reported. “The dogs barked, the boys shouted, the men laughed, the ladies smiled, and the men looked silly,” reported James Gordon Bennett’s *Morning Herald*. The old soldiers patrolled the line of the aqueduct as far as the Harlem River, but the strikers—mostly Irish-- wouldn’t give in. Instead, they laughed at and heckled the troops. The cavalry guards, after meeting with the strikers and suffering through their good-natured heckling, retreated. But because the depression caused by the financial panic of 1837 was still being felt, the laborers had to settle for 75 cents a day, the contractors claiming that the shortened days in winter meant they would work fewer hours anyway.

“What a waste of time,” Michael told Thomas when he returned to work.

“Same here—

Life in the camp went back to normal—up at dawn, feed and water the horses, eat in the mess tent, harness the horses to the wagon, haul loads of stone, brick, granite over the rough terrain. Rules were strict on the line—no liquor was allowed in the camps and few breaks were given during the day. That didn’t mean there wasn’t a good time to be had on weekends. Farmers took advantage of the tight ship the contractors ran to open speakeasys where men could buy a drop, gamble, fight, after they were paid on Saturday nights. Some enterprising women made themselves available in nearby brothels. Tom and Mike didn’t have time for that; they were saving what money they could. Mike had set his heart on saving \$500—his “stake.” Tom’s wages went home to Bridget, to pay the rent and clothe and feed them.

He was glad that Bridget had not wanted to come. She would not have liked the way Irish families lived here in shanties--nearly naked children wandering around. She’d feel like she was living in Five Points—in the rough. They wanted something better for their children, but Thomas began to feel that maybe the opportunities he had thought they would have in America would be denied them, that maybe America wasn’t the same for all. He was further reminded of this every time he returned to Newman’s boarding house where no one else had even what he had.

