

Part II Chapter 40 1846 Bad News

Lena's days were taken up with helping her mother care for the five younger children—the five year-old twins who were a handful, as well as James, now 3 and getting into everything, and baby John, who exhibited an independence of mind even at one year. He observed everybody and everything and had a steady gaze that seemed to Lena to imply that he knew what she was thinking. “Do you think the baby can understand what we're saying, Mama?” Whenever she picked him up to change his diaper, he smiled as if to thank her. “He smiles at me when I nurse him as if he wants to thank me,” her mother agreed.

At school Lena was in the upper form, where the teachers were mindful that this might be the last education their students would receive. Twelve seemed to be a dividing line. Some children left school at twelve or even earlier, to help support their families, working in factories, selling on the streets, becoming news or errand boys. Lena hoped that the fact that she was so necessary at home to help her mother would mean that she wouldn't have to go to work, as she knew some of her friends expected to be asked to do.

School would continue for her, she hoped, for she was curious about history and her brief glimpse into the Roman world with Will had intrigued her so that she really wanted to go ahead with Latin and learn about the ancient world. Papa had given her a few lessons from the Latin book her teacher lent her, and she studied it herself when she had time off from helping at home.

Bridget's time was taken up with the heavy load of caring for the family—shopping for and preparing meals; washing and mending old clothes and even making new ones for the older children. Lena and Will and Daniel always seemed to be outgrowing their outfits. The two boys were nearly the same size. Clothes were recycled through the family wherever possible. Rosie and Lizzie wore Lena's old clothes—no dressing them alike as Bridget would have liked. Baby clothes were constantly recycled. Linens and school clothes were washed every Saturday. Bridget had to constantly rely on Lena for help, although she occasionally called on Daniel to take responsibility for looking after the youngest ones. “Everybody in this family is necessary,” she would often say. She tried to give everyone a sense of shared responsibility by finding little jobs that each could do. Will was to help Papa. Dan was to dress and look after James. The twins were old enough to dress and look after themselves, but Lena was to keep an eye on them, at the same time she was always on call to help Mama.

The twins were developing personalities. Rosa was compliant and went along with whatever Lena or Lizzie suggested. Sometimes, she needed to stand up for herself against her more imaginative sister. Lena had showed the girls how to make daisy chains and watched one day as Lizzie suggested they make a daisy chain garland. Rosie had hers finished when Lizzie decided that she wanted to

try to make it long enough for a jumping rope. She snatched Rosie's chain and added it to her own and told her sister to make another. Rosie began crying, and Lena had to ask Lizzie to let her twin wear her daisy garland and to make whatever she liked with her own. "You're not her boss, Lizzie; you're her sister."

Tom was supposed to find jobs for Will to do, but his every effort seemed to fail. "Will's no good at anything," he complained to Bridget once. "I tried to get him to look after Jack, but whatever he does startles the horse. Gentleness is not part of his makeup. He'll have to go work in a factory, I'm afraid."

Lena overheard this comment, and couldn't wait to tell Will his fate. "Will, I know you don't go to school. You're never there when I stop for Dan. He says he hasn't seen you all day. What would you say if you knew that Mama and Papa are going to put you to work in a factory?"

"That'd be fine with me!" Will boasted. "School's a waste of time. I want to earn some money."

"Do you think that you'll get to keep the money? Don't you know that the family needs money for food?"

"Papa earns the money for that," Will fired back.

"You're pathetic," she complained. "I hope you have to work twelve hours a day in a dark, airless factory." She had heard descriptions of such places from children whose brothers and sisters worked in them. "With an evil boss."

Lena meanwhile had been preparing for her first Communion with as much devotion as she could. Her first confession would come first, and she had carefully thought of what sins she might have committed. They had studied the sins carefully and learned to examine their conscience, going over the possible sins.

She examined herself on the Commandments. She remembered when she first heard them read. The one that made the biggest impression on her was the first: "I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me." She still got goose bumps thinking about God saying this to the people through Moses. Exalting anyone or anything up before God was unimaginable to her, yet people did it all the time, she guessed. Fortunately, there weren't idols any more that people worshipped, but there must be other kinds of idolatry. She didn't think she was guilty of this, though, as she had really tried to be good and devout. As for the second commandment, she hadn't ever taken the Lord's name in vain, although her brother Will had. She heard him cursing under his breath. The third about keeping holy the Lord's day, she didn't have to worry about, as they always went to Mass together as a family. The fourth was the one that Sister had told them they should seriously think about: "Honor thy father and thy

mother.” “Do you really honor your parents?” Sister had asked, and Lena knew that she had not sinned against that one. She prided herself on being a dutiful, obedient daughter, the one her parents relied on. The rest of the commandments were clearly for grown-ups—not killing or stealing or coveting a neighbor’s wife or goods. She might occasionally have coveted a new dress that a friend had, but she was mostly satisfied with what she had.

She didn’t have anything really big mortal sin to confess, so she thought maybe she could find a venial sin. She reviewed the seven capital sins—pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Maybe she had been too proud of how well she did in school and how good a daughter she was. Perhaps she did lord it over Will sometimes, but he deserved it. In fact, she wondered if she wasn’t guilty of passively letting him get away with sins. Sin wasn’t just active, it was passive, covering up for a sinner. She hadn’t told anyone about Will’s cursing or not going to school. She had just given up on him. Maybe she should tell her mother. She decided that she would, to clear that off her conscience and then she would confess that along with pride. Pride was definitely her main fault, she thought, in her thoughts, although she hadn’t ever acted proud, she hoped.

In late April of 1846, a letter came from Tom from Ireland. “From Father O’Toole,” he said when he opened it. He began reading it, then his face turned white and he staggered to the table and sat down, dropping the letter before him.

Bridget dried her hands from washing up and took the letter up herself.

“Dear Tom,

I’m sorry to have to give you this terrible news, my son, but your dear father has died.”

That was all the further Tom could read, and Bridget turned to him and put her hand on his shoulder as she continued to read aloud:

“You’ve surely heard about how desperate the lives of the farmers have been these past years, since 1842, in and around Galway. The potato crop has failed again and again; there’s been nothing to eat, no money to buy anything and nothing to buy, anyway. People have been so desperate there’ve been starvation riots and starving people have broken into potato stores and attacked mills where oatmeal is stored. You can see how we’ve all been driven to the edge.

The military has been called in to break up these riots and have not hesitated to shoot “food rioters.” Your father was helping starving people in one of these last week and was shot and taken prisoner by the military as a “rioter.” He was shot

in the shoulder, and his wound was left untreated in jail. It festered and become septic. The soldiers delivered his body to your home only yesterday. Your poor mother and your brothers and sisters are desolate. Luckily their land is a freehold, or the landlord would have thrown out the family, as the tenant has died.

We are taking up a collection to help them. Fortunately your mother has no small children to care for and grown sons to help her. I don't know what you can do to help them, but she asked me to write you to let you know that your dear father has died in a noble cause."

The letter was dated February 20 and it was now May.

A gloom descended over the family that overshadowed any joy they might have felt for Lena and her much-anticipated first Communion. Her parents reproached themselves with being unaware how bad things had gotten the past year, although it wasn't until late fall and winter that the true extent of the suffering was apparent. It was now all anyone could talk about. Potatoes had been the only staple for years. It was the only crop that could sustain a family on the patch of land-- sometimes only an acre, on which they had to raise enough potatoes to pay rent and feed their families with what was left over.

Tom found copies of the Irish nationalist weekly *The Nation* at the Hibernian Society headquarters to read for himself what was happening in Ireland. The descriptions were worse than he could have imagined: "Beggars are on the roads." John Mitchell wrote about the "the wretched way in which the famine was being trifled with", and asked, had not the Government even yet any conception that there might be soon "millions of human beings in Ireland having nothing to eat." He pointed out that however much the government may differ about feeding the Irish people, "they agree most cordially in the policy of taxing, prosecuting and ruining them."



Tom sent an envelope with twenty dollars to Father O'Toole to ask him to supply his family with anything they needed and to make arrangements for his mother-- who would be nearly sixty, Tom thought--to come to America. He wrote Michael to inform him of their father's death.

May Day—First Communion Day, which Lena had hoped would be so sunny and happy, came at last. On Saturday Lena made her first Confession, and the priest sounded bored as she told him that she had bad thoughts about her brother and had answered her mother back. "Your sins are forgiven, my child. Go and sin

no more. Say one Our Father and three Hail Mary's." That evening no one at home asked about what had happened. Her mother didn't say, "Well, did you make your first Confession?"

Her first Communion the family tried to rally around her. They all went to Mass at the Cathedral for the ceremony, but the priest, instead of preaching about the great Sacrament of Love and the beauty of the young people entering into full communion with the Church, as Sister had told them, the Bishop talked about the famine in Ireland, and how many people were dying. Everyone was weeping, including her own parents, instead of being happy for her. Lena was shedding tears herself, although most of them were for herself.

Lena was back in school for her final year of primary school when a letter came from Father O'Toole saying that things were rapidly getting even worse. Tom's mother was too ill to travel. Her husband's death had destroyed her own will to live. She was looked after by her oldest daughter, the only child who was married, with two children to support, on their freehold, and his brothers were working it, but the blight had returned and it looked like there would be no crop again this year. She sent her thanks to Tom through Father O'Toole, for the help he'd sent which enabled them all to survive. She couldn't think of leaving the rest of the family.

When Bridget told the family that they were expecting the arrival of "another Chieftain," as she teasingly referred to her pregnancies, they shared this good news with their families back home. "Another blessing from God," they wrote. "At least this branch of the family is growing," Tom said wryly, enclosing another ten dollars, although their little savings could hardly spare it. Tom was still hoping to go to Chicago some day, but the situation back in Ireland was postponing that dream. Even if Bridget had been willing to go, which she wasn't, as she told him often, with the famine, they wouldn't be able to afford it.

Mr. Reynolds' health had been declining and Bridget realized that Lena could not take care of him. He clearly needed nursing care, and was grateful when his daughter on one of her Sunday visits, asked him if he wanted to come live with her and let her look after him. This would interrupt her business, she said, not mentioning what that business was, but she clearly loved the old man and couldn't leave him now that he was becoming too frail to look after himself. So they said a tearful farewell to the only grandfather they had known and promised to visit him, although his daughter didn't provide them with her address.

It would be nice if they could afford to take over Mr. Reynolds' apartment now with another child on the way, but they realized that was impossible. Mr. Newman needed to rent out Mr. Reynolds' rooms. The three girls were moved back into the front room, with their parents and the youngest child.

With the added expense of another child on the way and two families back home depending on them, Tom and Bridget decided that someone else in the family would have to work. Bridget could take in piece work as she once did for Tim, but where would she find the time with seven children? Moreover, how could she keep dangerous tools like needles and scissors out of their hands? Doing piece work at home was impossible. Someone would have to go out to work.

At the moment that could only mean Lena, who at twelve, was legally eligible. By the end of this school year she would have completed primary school, the legal requirement. Bridget thought of possible work for her. She could, of course, become a domestic. But remembering her own days working for Mrs. Malloy, Bridget was horrified at the thought. Even the domestics working for Mrs. Daly had no respect. Bridget wanted her children to be respectable, like their parents. Lena had told her of “pupil teachers,” children as young as thirteen who helped teachers control students in large classrooms, or “monitors” who tutored slower students to help them keep up. These teacher assistants must have received some money, Bridget thought, at least in the public schools. Lena might like this job. She mentioned this to Lena, asking her if she would like to be a “pupil teacher.” Lena shook her head vigorously. She wanted to finish her education at St. Mary’s Academy, as Nell had, and study to become a real teacher. Nell was teaching in her home, modeled on the old Colonial Dame Schools.

“I don’t know if that will be possible, Lena. I am sorry; I know how much you love school, but you will be old enough when you finish this year, to work. When the new baby arrives, with Mr. Reynolds now gone, unless you work outside, I will need for you to stay and help me you to look after the children at home. The twins will hopefully be going to school by then.”

Lena could not even answer her mother. She needed to go away somewhere by herself to sit down and cry, but there was no private place now that the girls didn’t have their own room any more. Her mother didn’t understand her at all. How could she expect Lena to spend all her time minding children? Lena’s imagination had been enlarged and her curiosity aroused about far away places and times. She wanted to visit those places in her imagination by reading history and stories about people who lived in those other times and places. She longed for the company of those who knew and could tell her about these storied worlds. She wanted to be the companion of Shakespeare and Homer and Virgil. How could she spend day with two young girls and two small boys as her only companions? How could her mother to ask her to give up her dreams and her future?

Lena’s days at school were colored by the sadness of knowing this would be her last year in school. As she read her books, her eyes filled with tears at the thought that this was her last opportunity for learning. She couldn’t tell her friends, although for many of them this would be their last year. She could not even speak of it to her teachers, lest she break down, so great was her distress.

It was just as well that she couldn't play with Will Daly anymore, as her mother had warned her. He always made her want to learn more. Even the reassurance that her brother Will would have to be the one to go out and work didn't make her feel any better. .

What was especially distressing to Lena was the knowledge that both her mother and her father had completed their education—in Ireland, no less. She brought this up with her mother one evening. “It's not fair, Mama. You and Papa both finished your education, you told me. You said how much it meant to you.”

“I know it's not fair, Lena. Life is not fair. Our lives are not what we had hoped for when we came to America. Your father with his education should be able to work as a teacher himself. We didn't know the extent of the prejudice against Catholics here in New York, did we? ”

“And in other cities,” Tom added—“Irish are not popular here, and it's getting worse. Nativists in Philadelphia led an anti-Catholic riot in 1844, and blamed it on the Irish Catholics. New York has been that way all along. That's why we'd do better in Chicago, Mike says.”

“Always harping on Chicago,” Bridget scolded him. “Lena, I was able to finish my schooling only so that I could help my brothers and sisters by going into service, which I did for a time after I finished, as a companion to an elderly lady. The school I attended required that girls intending to become ladies' maids or governesses or companion finish their education before they could be recommended. I was able to go there only because it was a free school, thanks to the philanthropy of some wealthy Irish ladies.”

“I would have done better in Ireland,” Lena lamented.

“From bad to worse,” Tom shook his head, as he read from the *Nation* while waiting for a job at the street corner. He borrowed papers like this from the Hibernian's library, papers that came in each week with the ships, bringing more news of the famine. “From bad to worse,” he sighed.

O'Connell, the voice for Repealing the Act of Union had been weakened in prison. While Parliament stewed—with some politicians arguing that the government relieve the situation in Ireland, and others arguing that the Irish shouldn't be put on the dole—things in Ireland were going from bad to worse. The blight continued, and whatever crops were harvested were exported. Farmers and their families were left to starve. Unable to wait for the matter to be resolved in Parliament, people were taking matters into their own hands, taking to the streets, finding food for themselves. Riots occurred in ever more communities. The September 23rd issue of *The Cork Examiner*—he was reading it in late November—carried an article that incensed him. There was another

attack on flour and bread stores, like the one in which his father had been shot, as a result of all the corn being exported and none left for the locals. He hated the way the reporting was slanted against the starving people—no mention being made of their condition:

On making inquiry, it was ascertained that this demonstration was made in order to prevent the merchants and manufacturers from exporting the corn or provisions of the town, for which purpose upwards of a dozen ships were lying in the harbour. After visiting several of the corn stores with the apparent intention of intimidating the proprietors, the mob proceeded down to the quay, where they speedily compelled some carmen, who were loading the vessels with corn for exportation, to desist and return to the stores; on coming back, they met another carman who however, did not remain to receive the injunctions of the mob, but immediately turned the horse's head, and commenced a speedy retreat amidst the cheers and jeers of the multitude. Not satisfied with their success in these instances, they turned towards another portion of the quay, where they succeeded in a similar manner.

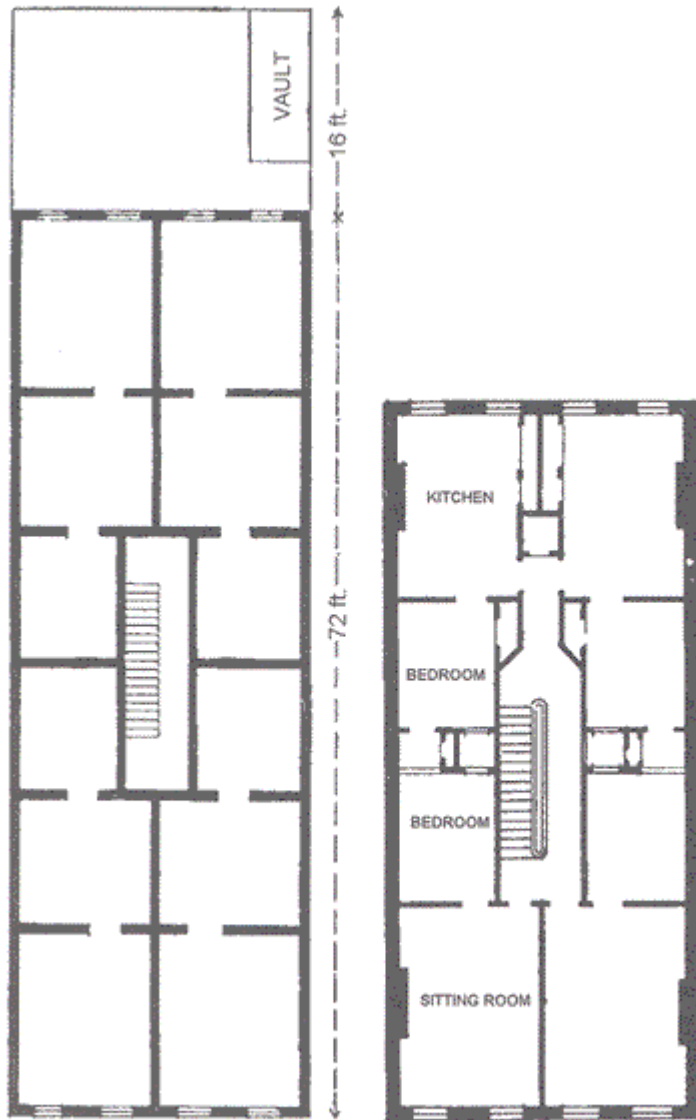
Up to four o'clock there proceedings were confined to preventing the exportation of provisions; and by the respectable portion of the inhabitants, it was anticipated that no actual violence would be the result; but unfortunately their expectations were frustrated. The mob, elated probably by the success of their first attempt, commenced at a later period of the day to demolish the flour and bread shops, which was only partially prevented by the interference of the Military. I understand, in consequence of the extent to which these outrages were carried, that Mr. Keily, J.P., arrived in this City on yesterday, for the purpose of consulting with the General of the district, and obtaining a large reinforcement of military.

The articles in these papers coming from his homeland were clearly written by Irish who sided with the landlords and merchants—referring to the merchants and manufacturers as the “respectable portion of the inhabitants” and the famished peasants as the “mob”; calling their efforts to stop the exporting of the grain as “intimidation”; and the Military as necessary to step in and save the flour and bread shops from further “outrage.”

If he were there, what would he have done? If he were that cartman employed to carry those loads of corn to the ships, depriving the desperate starving peasants of the only food available, he would turn his horse's head not away but toward the peasants, much as his father would have done. And perhaps he too would be shot as he stood against them, as his father had been, and perhaps he too would die, leaving Bridget a widow with seven children to support! This brought his father's death home to him as nothing had, and he could see himself in his father's shoes.

Although they had complaints about America, he was thankful that he and Bridget had come when they had and that they had at least a foothold now. Back there, they would be dead! He would tell Lena that she should not think she

would be better off in Ireland. At least she was alive and not starving. But he could see that the blight in Ireland was afflicting them all—father, son and now granddaughter.



Tenement of the Old Style. Birth of the Air-Shaft.