

Part II Chapter 41 1847—Relatives

“Someone else in the family will have to work,” Tom told Bridget one evening. “We have to send more money back home, now that my Da’s gone.” The latest letters had all been bad. Tom’s family had gone on relief. Bridget’s family had been evicted. Even though she had sent the money to pay a year’s rent in advance, the tenant farmer for whom her parents worked had failed to pay his rent to the landholder, who had seized all his holdings in forfeiture. The tenant had claimed that the produce that year was not sufficient to pay rent on all the estate. The landholder, who lived in England, would have none of it and distrained everything-- land, cows, produce, cottages-- away from the tenant, in the process dispossessing the cottiers. Her father was looking for another conacre, living meanwhile with relatives, who themselves faced the possibility of eviction. Tom and Bridget were rapidly exhausting their own savings supporting three families. Someone else would have to work. They decided that rather than sending all their money for rent, they should pay the passage of another family member to come to New York to work to support the family back in Ireland.

All Tom’s brother remained unmarried. They decided that his next younger brother, Mark, 30, should come. He sent him ten dollars and began looking for a job for him-- a job working on a public project where Irish laborers were constantly needed, like the high bridge project over the Harlem River, the last unfinished part of the Croton Aqueduct. He could camp at the project, as he and Michael had, and the other Irish men would show him the ropes.

While the family were waiting for Mark’s arrival, Lena was lamenting that she was in her last school term. She could hardly care about the sufferings overtaking relatives she had never known, when her own sufferings were all she could think of. She would not be able to continue her schooling—that was all that mattered. She wanted someone else to share her misery. It had long rankled her that Will was getting away with so much. She struggled with herself whether to tell her mother with the truth about her favored brother, who her mother assumed was tagging along behind her to school everyday and whom she expected to take over the escort duty next year when Lena would be staying home to help care for the children. It was time her mother knew the truth about Will.

“He does not go to school with me, Mama; when I pick up Daniel, he is nowhere to be seen. I doubt if he ever goes to school.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bridget seemed more upset with Lena for keeping this from her than she was with Will for playing truant. Bridget had believed Mrs. Childs who told her that children “come to us from heaven with their little souls full of innocence and peace.” “Do not discipline the child, but lavish affection on them.” Bridget believed that when loved and treated well, children responded in kind. In Mrs. Child’s book, only rarely did one have to administer even a slap, much less a whipping. What could be done with an unruly child?

"I shall very naturally be asked if I approve of whipping I certainly do not approve of its very frequent use; still I am not prepared to say that it is not the best punishment for some dispositions and in some particular cases. I do not believe that most children properly brought up from the very cradle would need whipping but children are not often thus brought up and you may have those placed under your care in whom evil feelings have become very strong. I think whipping should be resorted to only when the same wrong thing has been done over and over again and when gentler punishments have failed. A few smart slaps sometimes do good when nothing else will, but particular care should be taken not to correct in anger."

When confronted, Will acknowledged that he hadn't been going to school at all. It was a waste of his time, he said. And how better might he be spending his time, she asked. He refused to tell her anything other than that he had "something better to do."

Their discussion was conducted after dinner while the children were in the front room, supposedly out of earshot. Bridget decided that a slap on the wrist wouldn't be enough for this wickedness. A whipping it would have to be. In her pregnant condition it would be unseemly, so she asked Tom to take his son into the bedroom and teach him a lesson, by which she meant to give him a whipping.

Tom looked stricken. He loved peace and quiet when he came back from a day spent in the streets of New York. His wife and daughter tried to provide a serene atmosphere at home. Though there might have been mayhem before Papa came, Lena managed to calm them and engage them in work, lessons, games or story-telling when Papa was home. Now the peace had been disrupted and he had to step up and take a hand in matters. His pregnant wife appealed to him to do something he had never had to do, whip a child. He could not even whip his horse; how could he whip or strike his child? His education and experience had made him believe that the Irish had enough hands raised against them, humiliating and putting them down, and didn't need to do that to their own children. Appealing to his reason would be better.

"Will, don't you appreciate what a privilege an education is? I was fortunate to be educated and I want my son to be educated as well."

"What good did an education get you?" Will muttered.

Lena made the children hush as she listened intently to the words coming from the back room. She knew that her father would be hurt by this remark.

"Most boys your age have to work, Will. Would you like that?" No answer came from the back room.

“I’m afraid that will have to be your fate too, Will. If you won’t go to school, then you must go to work.”

Lena was distressed. Hearing her father begging his son to continue school brought tears to her eyes. He begged Will to continue in school, yet he asked her to leave school for the sake of the family. She resented Will for denying his father’s dream. She wished that she were in his shoes. She would make them proud of her. She was in tears. Daniel and the twins looked at her and seeing her tears, added theirs, not understanding why they were all crying. The only one who might have understood all that was in her heart was her mother, quietly nursing John in the kitchen. Perhaps she couldn’t have understood either.

A few days passed. Will resumed going to school, but when he thought that the storm had passed, he rejoined his friends-- cadging food or smokes, catching rats. He was surprised, then, when he was roused early one cold, dark morning, and pulled from his bed. “Get dressed. You’re coming with me,” his father said.

By 6:30, they were leaving the house, heading for the stable to get Jackson. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

Once Tom had harnessed Jackson to the cart, he turned to his son, “Your choice, Will. You can work beside me or you can work by yourself.”

His father had never been satisfied with his work, Will knew, preferring Daniel as a helper. He was always criticizing him and telling him what to do. “I’d rather work for myself.”

“I thought you would,” was all his father would say.



Tom headed Jack down Elm to City Hall Park, where a few carts were already lined up waiting for fares. Tom helped his son out, then pulling a leather tinker’s tray from the cart, handed it to him.

“Here are a dozen boxes of matches. Let’s see how you like being a street vendor. You may stay on this corner or walk around, and we’ll see what kind of a salesman you are. Tell anyone who looks interested that they are three for a penny or a shilling a box.

Will was intrigued. “How many are in a box?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one hundred?”

"If I sell them individually, I could earn thirty pennies per box. That's more than twice as much as selling them by the box."

"Well, I'm happy to see that you learned something in school."

"I learned that on my own." Will wanted to boast that he was not inexperienced as a salesman, but afraid to admit that it was rats he'd sold.

Tom didn't expect much of his son, but when he realized that negotiating and selling was no punishment, that his son seemed eager to try his hand at being a street vendor, he smiled. "Stay around in this area. The newspaper vendor will keep an eye on you. I'll come back around mid-day, and we'll share something your mother made for us."

After his father had left with a job, Will wandered about City Hall Park square for a time. A few people took pity on him and bought three matches for a penny. No one would spend more than a penny. At this rate he would never make any money. He went up to one nicely dressed man and said, "Only a shilling a box, sir." The man smiled, but shook his head. He tried a well-dressed woman who was followed by her maid. Remembering that women had been easier to cadge fruit from at stands, he looked up at her sadly, hoping she would think him an orphan.. "Only a shilling a box, ma'am." She smiled kindly, then turned to her maid and asked her to give him a shilling. The maid handed him his shilling and took the box to add to the woman's purchases. Will decided to concentrate on women customers and by the time he spotted his father's cart coming down the street at 1, he had sold 3 more boxes.

That evening, he boasted that he had sold seven of his twelve boxes, and altogether had earned almost one dollar. When his mother heard him, she was horrified but managed to contain herself until that evening when she reproached Tom. "I thought he was going to work for you; I never dreamed that you would let him wander the streets by himself, like a gypsy beggar."

"He's been wandering the streets by himself before today, Bridget, and the newsman on the corner watches him. Will seems to know about selling. You'll have to admit he seems to be proud of himself. Why not let him continue doing this as long as he likes. Maybe this is the opportunity he needed."

"As long as someone is watching him," she relented. Bridget avoided a fight but in her mind she had determined that she would not have any more of her children selling on the street. She would find some kind of work to do at home herself.

By Christmas she had found a way to work at home, making men's shirts, to be sold in Tim's shop. She would have preferred to make embroidered waistcoats, she told Betty, but Tim said they took more time than they were worth. Bridget had also wished to make them of Irish linen but Tim told her she would never

make any money at that rate, so she settled for fine white cotton. She made them up in a few average sizes, and charged one dollar apiece. Plain shirts sold more quickly, though of course she was up against more competition, as any woman good with a needle could make shirts at home. Even Lena, who was apt with a needle, could help with the stitching, in her spare time.

There were three members of the family were working—Will accompanied his father each morning to City Hall Square, where the most traffic could be found. Broadway and Chambers or Broadway and Chatham were ideal. His only competition came from elderly men who also sold matches, but they sat and waited for customers, whereas Will jumped about and ran after customers. He had learned to take advantage of the heavy traffic, to approach people waiting to cross Broadway or Chatham. Especially at Christmas he found his orphan pose appealing.

Lena was finding that with her mother working and asking her to sew as well, that she had even less time for her school work. As soon as she was home, her mother put her to work and for the rest of the day, she was looking after the younger children, helping with the laundry and cooking. One look from her mother appealing for help was enough. She could even anticipate what needed to be done and took over many chores without being asked—feeding the children, playing with them, putting them to bed were all tasks she had long assumed. Now she added food preparation, to free her mother to look after the babies.

Meanwhile her parents continued to worry about their families starving in Ireland. They were daily hoping for a letter giving Mark's date of departure. A brief note finally arrived (through a third party) notifying them that they were sailing in mid-February.

"They?"

Tom looked again to see whether he was correct. The person who wrote the letter for him had added a note saying that Mark had gotten married to Maggie Doyle, "a charming lass."

"That fool!" Tom remarked privately to Bridget when the children were in bed. "He never would have dared to ask anyone to marry him, had he not suddenly been leaving for America. No doubt he could have asked any girl he fancied and she'd have agreed, now that he has 'prospects.'"

Bridget normally would have laughed it off, but she agreed. A married man couldn't be sent off to live in a camp; he'd have to live with them. They couldn't possibly afford rent on another apartment. He'd have to move in with them. What work could he do? Had he any skills? None to speak of, Tom said. He'd only been a farmer on the family plot. He was what Tom would have been had

Father O'Toole not changed his life. They would find a way, Tom tried to reassure her. "Can she sew?" Bridget asked.. He knew nothing about Maggie, other than the fact that she was "a charmer."

The date of arrival of their ship from Liverpool was early March. Yes, Mark and Maggie O'Shaughnessy were aboard the ship, Tom was told at the shipping office, but their vessel was briefly quarantined out of fear of the fever, as many ships coming with Irish passengers bore the fever.

The family were terrified—the fever! They had heard that starving passengers from Ireland departing from Liverpool had been coming down with the fever a few days after embarking. The fever had spread through the month to six-week voyage, so that by the time they reached port, even the crew were stricken. Would their family be on such a ship? Tom visited the immigration office every day. Finally, after three days when Mark and Maggie showed no signs of the fever, they were released along with others to family members. Also waiting hecklers jeering at the new immigrants and distributing broadsheets proclaiming: "Head Tax on Foreigners," "Immigrants Bring Disease!" "Foreigners Depress Wages

The children could scarcely endure the wait and begged to go collect the first uncle and aunt they would know since Uncle Michael.

"You'll see them soon enough. You've waited three days."

Bridget had dressed the children in their best Sunday clothes and instructed them to remember the rules of courtesy, which she asked Lena to read aloud again. James and John had never heard the rules before.

1. Never talk back to older people, especially your father and mother.
2. Never whine or frown when spoken to by your elders.
3. Never argue with your elders for they know best.
4. Never do anything that is forbidden by your elders.
5. Do as you are told in a pleasant and willing way.
6. Never contradict anyone under any circumstances. It is very impolite.
7. Always greet members of your family when entering a room.
8. Always bid good bye to members of your family when you leave the room.
9. Always rise to a standing position when a visitor enters.

At the dock, Tom barely recognized his younger brother, whom he hadn't seen for fourteen years. He was taller—all the family were tall--and muscular from working the farm, but he was rail thin and shy, and huddled at his side was a slim girl said. "The world's a wonder," he said. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph bless us, we made it. We're here, we're in Amerikay."

Bridget took to them immediately—she felt sorry for them, with their coarse clothes and rough manners. They must learn English, of course, thought Bridget.

Fortunately, they would hear English spoken at home with the children. They would need a lot of improvements if they were to find their footing, and she could start by making them some new clothes. What they wore was threadbare. Even her children were better dressed. Clothes wouldn't make the man, however. Mark seemed diffident, lacking the self-confidence that Tom had, as if he had never amounted to anything, never accomplished anything before his marriage. Marrying and coming to America was his sole achievement. She wondered if Ireland had taken the stuffing out of him, or if he hadn't the stuffing that Tom had to begin with. At least now he would have a chance to show what he had. Bridget thought it a good sign that he had taken the first step himself in claiming Maggie Doyle, whose charms didn't impress her.

They impressed Lena. To her these relatives were celebrities who had just sailed all the way across that vast ocean she had seen on the globe at Will's house from that tiny island of Ireland. They brought that distant place with them, speaking in the special tongue her parents used occasionally with other adults. She wanted to learn this language, to hear these newcomers talk and find out as much as possible about Ireland for herself. She barely heard her mother telling her to make up the bed in the front room for them, and take the girls' things to the bedroom. They would sleep with the boys and Mama and Papa would sleep in the kitchen.

Lena's hunger was fed with stories of Ireland for days, brave but frightening tales of a families surviving on less and less as crops failed, of large families not being able to pay the rent, being driven from their homes, and their homes torn down, of neighboring families being forbidden to give them shelter even one night, and of being forced to take refuge in ditches. "No wonder they beg for admission to the Workhouse," Mark said. The food riots, their father's imprisonment and death, their mother's despair and decline. "Even though we're freeholders, we've now gone on Relief. Can't we bring the others over, Tom?"

Tom didn't respond to his brother's urgings. Mark and Maggie would have to accept that Tom and Bridget's store of funds was not going to stretch that far. It was hard enough to be adding two more mouths to their nine, but it was doubly hard to witness food thrown out into the streets for pigs, knowing that back home, people would snatch it first. "How could life be so different here?"

Maggie turned out to be a jewel, Bridget thought, after she showed some experience with a needle. "She's a quick learner," quicker than Mark, Bridget thought, but wouldn't say as much to Tom.

Mark was given the job of grooming and looking after Jackson while Tom went in search of work that involved two men. Larger jobs demanded more time, and Tom and Mark would often not be able to meet Will, who took his own lunch box and was given considerable more freedom. It was obvious to his parents that he knew New York streets as well as they. Bridget was having to relax some of

her standards, making shirts rather than shirtwaists, letting her son work independently. They needed all the help they could get, especially since, "There'll be two babies born this year," she told Tom.