

Part II—Chapter 42 1847-1849 Famine and Disease

Whenever Bridget was pregnant, as she was again when Mark and Maggie arrived that winter, she felt overwhelmed. How could she manage? Beside her seven children, how could she instruct helpless relatives in what it took to survive?. Tom could take care of Mark, but she would have to take Maggie under her wing. With Lena's help, though, Maggie quickly found her way. She learned where things were kept, how to empty the chamber pots, where and when and how to do the laundry, where the best prices for groceries were to be found, what neighbors to call on for help. Lena took to her immediately, and Peggy welcomed another Irish face in the house. Brian liked having another Irishman around as well.

Their little world was expanding with more family and more connections. Brian had finally saved enough money to bring himself to ask Nell to marry him. It had been obvious to all that the day would come, but Brian waited until he felt he had saved enough. Nell was 18 and eager to move out of the tailor shop and start a family of her own and had been encouraging him to speak up and go to her father. Finally, with Bridget's encouragement, he went to Tim. The Learys were fond of Brian and agreed, but stipulated that they must live closer to Grove Street.

Brian had begun negotiating for rooms in the Greenwich Village neighborhood, but no one would rent a room, much less an apartment for the \$8 a month that he was paying Mr. Newman. Finally Tim found a boarding house on Bleecker Street where he knew the owner who would let the couple have a small apartment for a reduced amount. Brian was ecstatic, and the couple planned their wedding for August of 1847.

Everyone was happy but Lena, who didn't look forward at all to her graduation in June, which would mark the end of her education. She and Maggie were regularly doing laundry with Peggy on Saturdays once it was spring, taking turns using the big black iron three-legged pot to boil soiled linens. Lena confided to Aunt Maggie her dreams of becoming a school teacher, "in a home school like Nell, or in a regular school."

When Maggie nodded encouragement, Lena shook her head. "Mama needs me at home," she said simply.

"I'm here now, Lena," Maggie reminded her. It was true. With Maggie to help, Lena was finding she had more time for her school work. Still she couldn't bear to raise the question again, especially now. Her mother needed her; that was settled. She shook her head and resumed stirring the clothes.

Maggie went to Bridget on Lena's behalf. With Maggie herself there to help, couldn't Lena finish her schooling? Maggie felt she and Mark owed the family so much already; and she would be staying home all the time as she suspected she might be pregnant. Put on the spot, Bridget couldn't refuse.

Mark didn't find it as easy as Maggie to fit in. He was suspicious of authority, and the police especially made him nervous, after one approached him one day as he was standing beside a loaded cart with Jack: "Let's see yer license, Mick.."

"Do they think we're nickin' the stuff?" he asked his brother, after Tom had shown that his license was up to date and the officer had left.

"There's so many new immigrants who don't bother to get licenses, they're bearing down."

"It's too much like home. The police look for any reason to stop you and any excuse'll do to arrest you."

"It's not like that here," Tom said.

"I hope not." But Mark's fears remained.

In late April Bridget's baby came—another boy. "When is Mama going to have another girl?" Lena whispered to Maggie. This makes five boys!"

"Another chieftain," her father told her proudly. "The clan is growing stronger. Strength in numbers." He and Bridget were doing as all their family had done, wanting as many children as God could send them. The more hands to work in the fields the better.

The naming of a new baby had become a family affair. "We've named enough after relatives," Bridget said. "Isn't it time one of our sons is named Thomas for his father?"

Lena proposed an idea, remembering that her suggestion had been accepted for the naming of John Adams. "We named John after a president. We could name Thomas after one too--Thomas Jefferson. He wrote the Declaration of Independence."

"Independence from the English," Tom bragged, for Mark's benefit.

"Too bad Ireland didn't declared its independence of the English back then as well," Mark retorted.

“ How on earth could the Irish have declared independence and fought against a country that had deprived us of our lands over the centuries and reduced us to penury? With what would we have fought? The rebels here had muskets. Who has muskets in Ireland?” Tom asked. “The men who killed Da.”

When June came, school was out. Lena was ecstatic. She went through the simple graduation ceremony from primary school at St. Mary’s with the secure knowledge that she would be continuing on to St. Mary’s Academy in September. There she could continue her education and fulfill the requirements for a teacher’s certificate. She looked forward to Nell’s wedding as well. She took special care of John, who was fond of her and followed her about when he wasn’t under his mother’s feet.

The hot summer of 1847 meant that tenement residents spent as much time outdoors as possible. Apartments were stifling, with only two windows in the front allowing any little breath air. Bridget spent as much time outside on the back stoop, peeling potatoes, cleaning vegetables, with Tommy hitched to her breast, meanwhile trying to keep John from getting into trouble. Lena or Maggie washed clothes every sunny day and hung them to dry on the lines. Maggie, who hadn’t been sure she was pregnant, became convinced when she began to be sick every morning. The children were allowed to roam about the neighborhood—Dan was put in charge of watching James while Rosie and Lizzie found friends to play jump rope or hop scotch. Every evening Mark and Tom came home exhausted and filthy from the dusty streets and had to clean off at the pump outside before they were allowed indoors. Will alone seemed not to notice the heat as he announced at dinner each night how much money he had earned that day selling his matches. He had added soap and pencils as a sideline.



Occasionally, Lena got to visit Nell, to watch her making her wedding dress with help from her mother. Queen Victoria’s wedding in 1840 had convinced the bride that she wanted white as well. Lena was only 13, but she dreamed of making her own white wedding dress someday, one just like Nell’s, with her mother’s help.

The wedding of Helen (Nell) Leary to Brian O’Hara was took place in St. Patrick’s Cathedral at 11 a.m. the last Saturday of August. The church had been scheduled for every other Saturday, so theirs happened to fall on the hottest day of that very hot summer. The families were dressed in their best.

Tom’s cart could only accommodate Bridget and the four younger children, as well as Maggie the mother-to-be. Lena, Will and Dan walked on ahead while her

father led Jack with the cart. Even the heat and the stench didn't bother them. Lena just held up her skirts to avoid soiling them in the refuse. Peggy and Mr. Newman and their children had hired a hackney carriage, as did the Leary's. Brian had gone ahead to make sure that all went well. Brian and Nell had friends as their witnesses. Cathy was flower girl. Many of Tim's long-time customers were invited, including the Dalys, who didn't come but sent a gift. A reception was held in a beer garden owned by one of Tim's clients. The Irish liked the German beers even better than their ales. The children ran about shrieking and dancing. Lena couldn't have been happier for Nell, who was her inspiration.

Finally September came and with it cooler weather and school. Three children now followed Lena out in the morning. Daniel was nine and decided that he was old enough to walk by himself the few extra blocks north to St. Patrick's on Mulberry and Prince. Bridget shook her head, saying that although he was a responsible and careful lad, he was still too young and that he must walk with Lena as far as the public school, and then wait for her to pick him up after school. After a few days of kicking stones, dragging sticks, and falling as far behind as possible, Dan had irritated Lena to such a degree that she finally told her mother that he was delaying her. He was allowed to go by himself to St. Patrick's, and led the others up Centre Street and over Grand to where he waved goodbye at Mulberry. The twins went as far as St. Mary's Free School at St. Mary's, and finally Lena was free to continue to the Academy.

In her years of high school she would be studying many subjects: maths (though not so many as boys schools, she found), history, geography, grammar, declamation, composition, book-keeping, music, drawing and needlework. She definitely knew a lot about that already. With so many subjects and so few teachers (most taught several subjects) and so few books, classes met erratically. Music and drawing, book-keeping and declamation might only meet once a week, while geography and history and composition met twice, and .history and math and grammar (new books!) met every day. She asked her teachers what she had to do to earn a teaching certificate, but they could not tell her. They were religious, they said, and their communities told them which classes they were to teach, and asked them to prepare on their own. There were so few books among them that the teachers had to explain what the books said and ask students to read aloud important passages for everyone to hear and remember. Students like Lena would listen attentively and take notes to study. They did not have a second chance and no one was brave enough to ask for anything to be repeated. All that mattered to Lena was that she would continue learning all that she could, as long as she could. She begged to borrow books from her teachers, especially anything by Mr. Dickens.

One evening in late November, Maggie went into labor. Bridget reassured the frightened young woman that there was nothing wrong when her baby didn't come right away and her labor was prolonged for hours. She entertained her with stories of her own childbirth waits--Lena was the longest, though John had

taken his time as well. Finally, near dawn, after keeping everyone awake with her cries, Maggie gave birth. Bridget told her that the baby was a fine boy who would join the clan of the Chieftains.

“And what’ll you name him?” Bridget asked her.

“Do you mind if I call him John?” she whispered. “I promised my Da I’d name my first son after him.” So there were two babies in the small apartment-- a Tommy a second Johnny.

Famine and Disease

News began reaching the New York papers in late 1847 that the potatoes had failed all over Ireland. Stories of the famine in Ireland became increasingly pathetic. New York officials were moved to ship Indian meal and un-ground corn



to the Dublin Relief Committee, but most of it did not reach the starving people for whom it was intended. Relief was entrusted only to Protestant, not Catholic agencies. Parish priests were not allowed to distribute to their own flocks. Rather, cuts were taken along the distribution route, or mouldy meal was substituted for the good, or ships refused to unload until the cargo was paid for at twice or three-times the market value. In other places, distributors charged for the cost of the small sacks they used to divide the relief. The only practical help they received came from the Quakers who set up stations and administered the aid themselves and thus saved many lives. But so many were lost or forced into the work houses that Tom and Bridget couldn’t bear to talk about it,

especially in front of the children who asked why Mama was crying and Papa was shaking his head.

Horror stories of spectral figures begging on the roads, of boats rowing out to beg from passing ships filled the papers. As the famine worsened over the next years, more and more Irish immigrated to America, housing and jobs in New York became even scarcer, although the Irish would live anywhere, do anything, for any wage. They were resented more than ever for this, and slogans Tom had first seen at the immigration office now appeared everywhere: “*Head Tax on Foreigners!*” “*Immigrants Bring Disease!*” “*Foreigners Depress Wages!*” “*No Irish Need Apply*” were common signs in windows.

Tom felt the pinch as did most Irish laborers. Potential customers took one look at him and heard his brogue and looked for another horse cart. To make him feel worse, every letter from Mike urged him to join him in Chicago, where

construction projects—canals, railroads, were begging for workers. Mark, who had been ten when Mike left and who hadn't seen him for twenty years, barely remembered his oldest brother, yet he would like to go himself. Both men wished to go where Irish immigrants had not overwhelmed the town.

In 1848 the situation only got worse—more famine ships arrived. Work was harder to find for the brothers. The additional income brought in by Bridget, Maggie and Lena's needlework and Will's street peddling, was essential. They had very little for themselves, and could no longer send anything back home. They had even lost track of Bridget's family since they had been evicted and assumed they must be in the work house. Only Tom's family kept any contact, and the news from them was always bad. Weak from hunger, they were falling sick. His sister's youngest child died early that year and her older child followed toward the end. His mother wasn't expected to live, especially as any food they found she gave to her children.

Disease traveled with the ships as well. Some were called "coffin ships" for the numbers who had died and been buried at sea. The slogan *Immigrants Bring Disease!* seemed only too true. Even cholera--which the pure water brought from the Croton reservoir had been intended to eradicate--suddenly reappeared, brought over from Europe, where it raged in 1848. In December the *New York*, a ship with three hundred passengers that had been exposed to cholera, was quarantined on Staten Island. Some of the passengers escaped to Manhattan, where cholera cases began to appear immediately. The freezing winter of 1848-1849 stopped the spread of cholera, but by mid-May, cholera cases were again appearing, and by June the outbreak had reached epidemic proportions.

Five Points, where the family lived, in the notorious Second Ward, the slum district where the Irish and African-Americans congregated, had always been a center of disease. So many families were housed in its tenements—many more than they were built for. Everyone had taken in relatives from the famine. Such a lot of people created and lived in mounds of filth. The streets were filled with manure and refuse. Fresh water was scarce.

Just as the poor Irish were blamed for bringing the famine on themselves in Ireland as God's punishment, so they were blamed for bringing on the cholera epidemic in New York. God was punishing them for their lives of drink, vice and filth. Everyone who could afford to leave the city did. Business stopped. The only job for horse carts was heading out of the city. .

Tom noticed that the explanations for the epidemic varied according to the speaker's agenda. Clergy, politicians, and elite reformers claimed that the devastation proved God's support for their respective causes. Abolitionists blamed the epidemic on slavery. Moral reformers claimed it meant that God was judging the nation for its growing materialism and its indifference to the plight of

the poor. Nativists interpreted it with anti-immigration slogans-- "*Immigrants Bring Disease!*" Clergymen used it as the opportunity to preach against every vice—drunkenness, greed, war (with Mexico), Sabbath breaking, infidelity. Ordinary people believed it was airborne infestation, brought in somewhat the same way the potato blight was, by an atmospheric shift that created a chemical reaction in the body. They did not believe it was contagious; isolating the victim was not deemed necessary.

.President Zachary Taylor decided that the nation needed a national day of repentance and. He set aside Friday, August 3, 1849 for humiliation, fasting and prayer. All the Irish went to Mass and fasted as if it were Ash Wednesday in Lent.

On a sweltering day late in August, Will came home early from City Hall Park, complaining of feeling tired weak and thirsty. Rather than boasting of selling most of his matches and pencils, he said his legs felt so weak he could barely walk. He lay down on a mattress on the bedroom floor and begged Daniel to bring him some water, and for a while he slept, but had to run to the chamber pot. Still he was thirsty, and more drinking was followed by diarrhea. Before long he was vomiting as well. His mother and Lena knelt beside him. He asked for more water, but all that he drank ran right through him. His leg muscles grew cramped so that he seemed locked up.. He couldn't seem to hold any liquid down. By the time his father had come home, the boy was moaning. No one had any idea what was wrong. His mother felt his pulse and found it was racing, yet he had no fever. She had never seen cholera before. She tried to keep water on his lips, but it all came back. He could no longer control his bowels. She made the rest of the children stay out in the front room, and only his father and she were allowed beside him. Then, realizing it was too disturbing for them, she asked Maggie and Lena to take everyone down to Peggy's and tell her what was wrong. She would come get them. .

That evening passed with Will growing ever more listless. Through the night his parents watched helplessly as he gradually closed his eyes, slipped into shock, then into a coma and by dawn he was gone. What had happened to him? How had he gone so quickly? They were distraught.

By morning, news of Will's death had spread throughout the boarding house. Mr. Newman came up to their floor and quietly warned that they needed to report his death to the police, then bury the boy's body immediately. It was likely cholera, and he didn't want to take any chances on its spreading among his other boarders. It might be best if they move, in fact, as the family had possibly all been exposed and more might come down with it. He was obviously worried that his own family might have been exposed.

On top of Will's death, to have to move? With two new babies and six children, where could they find housing? Especially in an epidemic!