

## Part II Chapter 8 Peggy

“Peggy McGee, newly come from Cork,” Michael introduced her to Bridget and Thomas after supper one evening. “She likes to be called ‘Pegeen.’” Bridget noticed that she was extraordinarily pretty, with pale skin and green eyes and reddish hair. Michael had found a girl, it appeared.

Ships were still arriving in New York from England. Immigrants were still being cast up on New York’s shores. One of the last ships to dock in November before the weather made crossing impossible had brought Martin McGee and his sister Peggy--Pegeen. Martin and Peggy had fetched up at Mrs. Malloys in the same way that Thomas and Bridget had. Upon depositing Peggy Martin had disappeared, abandoning his seventeen year old sister on Mrs. Malloy’s doorstep. Peggy was now an orphan and Michael had apparently adopted her.

She had been afraid to come, she explained. She’d only been to Cork once. She didn’t want to leave her family, but there were so many children and her parents had arranged it, against her will, with Martin, in spite of her tears. Now he had ditched her. She had no means to pay Mrs. Malloy who insisted that she owed \$5 just like everyone else. Peggy had no way of paying, of course, so Mrs. Malloy had offered her a position.

“As a char girl?” Bridget knew Mrs. Malloy was looking for someone else to work for her.

“No,” Peggy said. “She didn’t say exactly what I would be doing, but she said that I would make a little for myself on the side, maybe 5 shillings a week.”

Bridget’s raised eyebrows made Michael step up and say, “But I’m going to pay for her first month, so she can go find a good job elsewhere.” Peggy looked overcome with gratitude and became Michael’s adoring ward.

After he had settled up with Mrs. Malloy, who put Peggy in a small room in the back on the ground floor, Michael turned to Bridget “I have no plans to keep looking after her. I’ve other plans, and they don’t include her.” He wanted her to help find Peggy a job and get on her own feet.

Bridget felt that she was barely gotten her own feet under her, but she realized that Peggy was one of those women who are totally helpless (maybe this was why her family insisted that Martin bring her). “Pretty, but not too bright,” she thought. What could she do to help her?

It was late November—the days were getting shorter, and by the time Bridget left to walk back to Mrs. Malloy’s after 5 in the evenings, it was already dark. One evening she was heading down Broadway, walking slowly so as to peer through the sheer curtains into some of the parlors that had gas light. Suddenly a man

came up to her and asked if she were lost. Startled, she answered “No,” wondering what he meant. “You look like a nice girl. I’d be the right man for you. Let’s talk in your room. Where do you live?”

Bridget didn’t know what to do. A man had never propositioned her before. She turned and fled down the street and didn’t stop until she was in the comparatively safe confines of Mrs. Malloys.

Thomas had to do something, she said. They had to find a place closer to work. Thomas was too exhausted to hear the desperation in her voice, as she was urging him yet again to move her out of that place.

That evening after supper, she asked Peggy if she had done any domestic work at home. Peggy didn’t understand what she meant by “domestic.” “Can you sew?” No. “Can you cook?” No. “Can you clean?” Yes. “Can you wash up?” Yes. “Can you do the laundry?” Yes, of course. Fine. That was settled. Mrs. Daly had said she needed more servants. Peggy could work as a domestic for Mrs. Daly; that way she and Peggy could walk home together after work.

The next day at work, she asked Mrs. Daly, who agreed to give Peggy a chance. She could help cook in the kitchen and in the laundry. Peggy could be a char girl. She would earn 5 shillings a week. Bridget knew this wouldn’t be enough to pay Mrs. Malloy’s rate of rent, but maybe she could sleep in at the Daly’s, as the other servants did, since she was a single girl.

During the rest of the week, Peggy helped Mary the cook. First she was asked to wash dishes in the kitchen, laboring over the vat of hot water (which she brought up from the basement tap and heated on the wood stove), but things kept slipping from her hands and breaking. Another day Cook then sent her



downstairs to prepare some water in the laundry. She showed her the pile of clothes that Mrs. Daly wanted washed. Somehow Peggy managed to find something dark in the pile and leave it in, with the result that some white bed linens had a bluish cast. Mrs. Daly was very fussy about her white things being spotless, and Peggy isn’t really good at spotless. Another day Cook asked her to help Ellen the chambermaid as she cleaned in the parlors. She was then directed to do the same in the dining room. Peggy hadn’t been paying attention, perhaps, for she missed cleaning under the table and behind the chairs.

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Mary said that she felt sorry for Peggy, but a girl who didn’t know what cleanliness was, much less Mrs. Daly’s idea or her mother’s idea, truth be told, was not fit to be in domestic service. On Saturday Mrs. Daly summoned Peggy and Bridget into the kitchen and told them that

she was sorry but Peggy had not worked out. She gave her five shillings for the week. Peggy cried all the way home.

That Saturday evening, Bridget told Thomas that Peggy has been fired. She wondered aloud why she had recommended Peggy. Had she been judging Mrs. Daly from her dealings with herself, forgetting that Mrs. Daly was normally very fussy, and that she herself was very careful meticulous worker. That night at supper Peggy said that when she had gone sobbing to Mrs. Malloy, she had reassured her that she could work for her.

The next morning, after Mass, Thomas had a talk with Bridget. He had been thinking about what she said to him yesterday, about Peggy. He hadn't really paid any attention when she told him that Peggy was going to work for Mrs. Daly, but now that he had got thinking about it, he wondered how Bridget could have helped Peggy, not even a relation, get placed with the Dalys, when, now that he thought of it, she might have done something for him along the same lines, or hadn't she thought of that? In short, why hadn't she tried to help him?

Bridget was startled. She couldn't think of anything to say, so Thomas continued. He hadn't wanted to admit it to her, but working as he was and where he was was destroying him. Couldn't she see that?

Again, she was too shocked to speak. No, she hadn't seen that. He had never complained.

Well, didn't she know how difficult the work he was doing was? It had taken him a while to admit this to her, but once the dam burst, it all came out—all his resentment and misgivings. Did she think he just got up and every morning at 5, spent a day at work and got home after 7 every evening without anything happening to him all day? He couldn't bring himself to describe it even then, but couldn't she see that her normally upbeat Thomas felt flattened. He had the stuffing beaten out of him.

How was she supposed to know???? Did he mean that he would have liked to work for the Dalys? Didn't he remember that he never had a good word to say when she talked about Mr. Daly? Would he have liked to work in the laundry? In the kitchen? After all, the only male employee was Mr. Ruggles, the butler.

Bridget was crushed, realizing that she had put in a good word for someone she didn't even know, who turned out to be a failure, and hadn't thought to help her husband, who could have succeeded, though at what she couldn't imagine. What was he prepared to do? A carpenter they didn't need. A teacher, maybe, a tutor? But they had no children yet. Odd jobs? She decided to speak up for him and ask. Maybe Thomas could do something for the household.

The next morning, when she went in, Mary told her that Mr. Daly would be hiring the servants from now on. No matter, Bridget asked Mr. Daly if her husband could work in any capacity for him, mentioning that like herself, he had been educated. Mr. Daly asked her for more information and when he heard that Thomas was being educated for the priesthood, however, he suddenly lost interest.

When Bridget gave Thomas the bad news that evening, he just shook his head. He hadn't expected anything, he said. From his days studying in Tuam when they followed O'Connell and Dr. Hughes, he knew of the great prejudice against "papisty" that obtained even in Ireland. Mr. Daly was Anglo-Irish, after all, and although he was too diplomatic to say so, he didn't want any "papists" in his house.

"But he knows I'm a Catholic. And Mrs. Riley and Mary and Ellen—we're all Catholics, and he know it."

Thomas went on about how the Irish peasantry from which most domestics were drawn were too naïve to understand the politics of it, but someone who had studied for the priesthood knew all the history. "No doubt about it, Bridget. He knows that I know what they've done to us, and he's not going to let me in the house. He's a typical bigot. Besides, Mrs. Daly hired you, and she needs you, Mr. Daly knows that. He'll not interfere with Mrs. Daly. What Mr. Daly really means is there are no jobs for Catholic MEN."

"Well, it's a good thing that you explained all that to me, because I certainly didn't know it from being there with him. It's a good thing I didn't ask him if I could live in and bring my husband with me, then." Then she remembered that whereas Mr. Ruggles lived in he was not a Catholic.

One good thing did come of this first "fight" that Thomas and Bridget had. Knowing how he felt had awakened her, and when she noticed that there were crews widening the streets in the neighborhoods around Washington Square, e.g., at Waverly Place and West Washington Place, she mentioned it to him. "Maybe you could work somewhere else as a cartman, somewhere nearer?"

She and he suddenly realized that Thomas could work anywhere, not just on the railroad line, which had moved farther and farther north, since he had started work and were already up in the 30s. Why go that far when he could have gone only up to 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>?

Thomas applied and found that cartmen were needed all over the city. There were jobs to be had everywhere—wherever earth was being moved. As long as he had his own cart, he could just tell a crew foreman that he had been working on the Railroad but wanted to work closer to home, and it didn't matter to them who did it. If they could use him, he could work. So Thomas began his career as

a free lance cartman, and mentioned to Michael that he would be even more employable if he could bring his own shovel.

This was the great insight of Thomas's first year in New York. He could always work as a cartman. Being a cartman gave him mobility. He could work anywhere. Everyone needed a cartman. Cartman were indispensable. If he didn't like one job, he could find another. Everything in New York was under construction. New York had a great future, and he had a future as a cartman in New York.

That Christmas, when Michael and Peggy and Bridget and Peggy celebrated together, Michael gave him a shovel. .