

The True Witness,

AND

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, OCT. 13, 1871.

NO. 9.

FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

In the middle of the inner quadrangle, there used to be a roundish space, quite smooth, and well sanded over, while the rest of the yard around it was roughly paved—and could human foresight have contrived anything more appropriate for the marble ring, and the pegtop ring? In "hide and seek," where could the appointed seeker find such a retreat as the old stone sentry-box—the boys called it an old confessional—in which to turn away his head and eyes, until the other urchins should have concealed themselves among some of the fantastic recesses around them? And where could leap-frog be played so well, as under the old archways?—and if a sudden shower came on, how conveniently they afforded shelter from it! To such of the boys as had courage for the undertaking, what places above ground, ay, or underground, so fit for enacting "the ghost," as were the pandemonium retreats of the black chambers of the third archway? Was there ever so luxurious a seat for a tired boy to cast himself upon, fanning his scarlet face with his hat, as that offered to him by the bench in the larger quadrangle, canopied over head by its two umbrageous sycamores, one at its either end? Or, if a poor boy happened to play too much, and too long, and were summoned up to his task, without having coned a single word of it, what crumbling old walls under the sun could compare with those at the opposite side of the square, for supplying in perfection a weed called—locally at least—"Penitery," to which the suddenly terrified idler might run in his need, grasping it hard and threateningly, and repeating the following "words of power:"

"Penitery, penitery, that grows by the wall,
Save me from a whipping, or I pull you roots and all."

And there was a third sycamore, in a corner belonging to a thrush, who from year to year built her nest, and brought forth her young in it, and she was the best fed thrush in the world. Her nest lay almost on a level with one of the school-room windows—you could nearly touch her, by stretching out your arm from it—and outside this window projected a broken slate, constantly kept filled with various kinds of provisions, for her and her family. Her husband seemed to grow lazy under these circumstances. He would scarce ever leave home in quest of food, and, indeed, do little else than perch upon the very topmost bough over her head, and whistle to her all day long. As for herself, she seemed, out of her trustiness in her little purveyors, to live in a delightful state of happy quietude. Not a bit startled was she, or even put out, by all their whoopings and uproar in the yard below. Nay, she seemed to take a matronly interest in their studies too; for the boys of the head class, during school-hours, could plainly see her sitting on her eggs, while they sat to their books or slates, and they would fancy that her little, round, diamonded eye, used to be watching them.

Well. The old house confronting you, as you entered the first quadrangle from the street, and the rear of which looked into the second quadrangle, was the old school-house. Passing its sharply arched doorway of stone, you entered a hall, floored with old black oak, and ascended a spiral staircase of black oak, coiling round an upright of black oak, and stepped into the school-room, floored with black oak, and divided by a thick partition of black oak from the master's bed-chamber; in fact, all the partitions, all the doors, all the stairs, all the ceiling-beams—and ponderous things they were—down stairs, and up stairs, through the interior of the erude old edifice, were all, all old black oak, old black oak, nearly as hard as flint, and seemingly rough from the hatchet, too; and the same was the case in the interiors of the other inhabitable portions of the concatenation of ancient buildings.

Through the partition separating his bed-chamber from the school-room, the head of the seminary had bored a good many holes, nearly an inch in diameter, some straightforward, some slantingly, to enable himself to peer into every corner of the study, before entering it each morning; and this is to be kept in mind. At either end of the long apartment was a large square window, framed with stone, and, indeed, stone also in its principal divisions. Over head ran the enormous beams of old oak, and the spaces between them were monotonous sights, all in a row, and equally distant from each other, of monotonous angels, in stucco—the usual children's heads, with goose wings shooting from under their ears; and sometimes one or two of those angels became fallen angels, flapping down on clipped wings either upon the middle of the floor, or else upon the boys' heads, as they sat to their desks, and confusing them, and their books, and slates with fragments of stucco and mortar, rotten laths, and rusty nails.

In a kind of recess, on the side of the school-room opposite to the boys' double desks, was an old table, flanked by a form, to which, at

certain hours of the day, sat some half-dozen young girls, from six to ten years, who came up from the quaint old parlor below, under the care of the master's daughter, who therein superintended their education in inferior matters, to be occasionally delivered into his hands for more excellent instruction.

The principal of this celebrated seminary wrote himself down in full, and in a precise, round hand, James Charles Buchmahon; and his establishment as "the English Academy;—principal, we have called him—despotic monarch, we should have called him; for he never had had more than one assistant, and the head of that one he broke before they had been many weeks together.

And never were absolute monarchy, and deep searching scrutiny, more distinctly stamped and carved on any countenance, than upon that of James C. Buchmahon, master of the English Academy. And that countenance was long and of a soiled sallow color; and the puckering of his brows and eyelids awful; and the unblinking steadiness of his blueish grey eyes insufferable; and the cold-blooded resoluteness of his marbly lips unrelaxable. At the time we speak of him, James Charles Buchmahon might have been between fifty and sixty, but he wore well. He was tall, with a good figure and remarkably well-turned limbs, and he had gift to know it," for in order not to hide a point of the beauty of those limbs from the world, he always arrayed them in very tight-fitting pantaloons, which reached down to his ankles. His coat and waistcoat were invariably black. A very small white muslin cravat, and a frill sticking out quite straight from his breast, occupied the space from his chin to his waist. And James Charles Buchmahon's hat was of cream-color beaver, high crowned, and broad-brimmed; and he even carried either a formidable walking-stick of stout oak, or else a substitute for it, made of five or six peeled switches, cunningly twisted together, and at one end loaded with lead.

It has been hinted that Ned Fennell has promised us some further notice of a few of his former playmates; the subjects over whom, in common with himself, the master of the English Academy held sway; and this is the place into which again, in the teeth of our critical remonstrances, he beseechingly insists to be permitted to introduce his little living picture-gallery. It is not quite waywardness, he says, which induces him to be so pertinacious. Admitting some yearning, for mere feeling's sake, to reproduce and record characters, once either dear or interesting to him, Ned will have it, that he can prove, by his faithful portraiture of their early bent, and its similarity with their eventual fortunes or fate, how true it is, that "the sapling contains the full-grown tree;—that "the child is father to the man."

CHAPTER XIII.

First, then, Ned presents his friend James Graham, his old, old friend—even to this very blessed day and hour, his old friend.

James was an English boy—a curiosity of course to the whole school; a small-boned, wiry little fellow, and not remarkable for first-rate talent. But he was remarkable for perhaps, a still better kind of talent—that, namely, of untiring industry and application, which, in the end, enabled him to sweep out of his way all scholastic difficulties. And even in those early days of his life, James Graham had prudence and foresight, ay, and thrift enough, for forty years of age. In everything that concerned him he went steadily on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, by the shortest road to his object. After school was dismissed, and when almost every other boy loitered to play, James would race home as fast as he could, to con his tasks for the following morning; and sometimes, to be sure, some of his classmates, after having worked for the purpose, like mill horses, an hour or so, would succeed in putting him down in his class; but, after that, it behooved them to be watchful and continuously industrious; for if they were not, little lank James Graham, who was always industrious, and always prepared, would be sure to step up again. James's father resided in the country; while he boarded and lodged in an humble, respectable family, in the town. He was allowed a certain weekly sum for what his friends considered necessary expenses, apart from his boarding and lodging. But out of this sum, limited, of course, as it was, James contrived to save money for the future—absolutely for the future, almost in the full meaning of the word. Partly in the following manner.

Pending from small nails inside his trunk—Ned Fennell often saw the arrangement—were little cotton bags, one containing half-pence, another penny-pieces, another five-penny silver pieces, another ten-penny silver pieces, another half-crowns, another whole crowns, and the last golden guineas, or else pound-notes. And when his half-pence amounted to penny pieces, he would transfer them in that shape to the next little bag; and when that contained something above five-penny pieces he would confirm them into the smallest silver coin; and so on and on he went in rotation, through all his little satohels, until finally half-pence, &c. &c., merged into the guinea or the pound-note.

But though thus saving, he did not hoard like a miser,—a title given to him by commonplace observers at school, whose chance pence used to "burn their pockets," as they themselves admitted, until they threw them away upon the purchase of some unnecessary toy or sweet-thing. From James's wealth first resulted a full though miniature library of "the British classics;" and having since carried into more active life, and even into the mighty competition of the city of cities, matured and confirmed, his early school-boy characteristics, it is many years since he has reaped the solid advantages which, when almost a child, they assuredly promised to him.

"Dear James!" adds Ned Fennell, "I do not yet well know why so perfect a character as yourself ever could like, or love a harum-scarum fellow, like what I then was; and yet you did—and some of my school cronies, along with me; ay, and often made us the better of your little pocket library too. To be sure they and I used to fight your boxing battles for you, at any odds against all your gibing or cowardly assailants; and though you were not a frolicsome boy, you were a mirthful one; and at last, we could often make you laugh heartily, in your queer, English way, at our queer Irish fun—ay, and now and then join in it too, under sufficient protection; for your frame, dear James, was not strong enough for all the haps of school-boy adventure and warfare; still I do not know how it was that you loved us, and to this day do love us so well; except indeed, my conjecture be right, that your good nature was equal to your other good qualities."

George Booth very little resembled James Graham. He was the biggest and tallest boy in the school. In fact he was eighteen or nineteen—and quite a giant compared with every other boy around him. Yet he never could acquire enough to entitle him to a place in the head class, and so was always a member of some inferior one, where he towered above his companions—very little fellows indeed—like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. Still it was in stature only that he surpassed even these—ay, or even equalled them. He was always at the tail of his class—or, as the little people termed it, "Paddy last," and as a matter of consequence, George Booth wore, nearly from morning to night, the idler's cap—a curious head-gear enough, and of such a height, as to make George seem nearly twice as tall as he really was.

But all this seemed to give George very little trouble. Day after day, he bore, with a stolid, unwincing endurance, his coronation as monarch of dunces, and the sore humiliations, scoffs, and insults resulting therefrom. In fact, he seemed to have made up his mind, that he had been sent to school for the purpose, and for no other, of wearing the idler's cap; and as he plodded home every evening, George used to be heavily good-humored and jocular, in his own peculiar way, as if he felt convinced, that he had gone through his day's duty with consistent credit to himself.

Before school broke up, each day, all who could tack words of two syllables together, stood in a semicircle round the room, first, second, third, or fourth classes as it might be. Upon these occasions, if a boy of an inferior class spelt correctly a word, which his neighbor in a higher one had "missed," James Charles Buchmahon's discipline to meet the case was rather singular. As no member of the third class, suppose, could take the place of one of the second class, he was entitled, as an equivalent triumph over the dunce of the moment, to seize his nose between his right finger and thumb, and so lead him round the school-room. Now it may be believed, that George Booth, very often, subjected his organ of smell to such vile usage. But in the contrivances of the little fellow—scarce higher than George's knee—to lay hold on George's nose, much of the interest of the scene consisted. From some oiliness of surface, or else fleshy elasticity, peculiar to it, the feature was very slippery, so that when the tiny boy, helped by a good jump upwards, succeeded in catching it, it would slip, over and over, through his fingers, until James Charles Buchmahon, to end the proceeding, would, in the calmest but most authoritative tone, direct George Booth to bend himself half double, so as that his countenance might come within reach of the pigmy aspirant; and George would quietly obey, and then be led about, amid the laughter and shouts of all the lookers-on; and yet, when he was again allowed to stand upright in his class, neither shame, nor sorrow, nor excitement could be traced in his pale, fat countenance. And so far George's character seemed legible enough. Blockheadism and insensibility to disgrace very fairly go together. But there were some points about him which no human being, not even James Charles Buchmahon, could comprehend: certain dull, muddy, and it must have been unintended quiddities, laboring, like asthmatic lungs, in the recesses of his brain—or rather of whatever it was which stood in the place of brains to him. For instance, he would now and then be imaginative, forsooth; but we cannot venture, no more than James Charles Buchmahon could, to define these precious portions of George's mental existence or con-

sciousness. An illustration of them in facts, shall, however, be attempted.

As if beginning to grow a little tired of performing his daily duty, under the edifice of the idler's cap, George, one sunny autumn morning, after breakfast, took a stroll into the country, instead of going back to the English Academy; and all that day he was not to be heard of until hunger at last drove him home to his father's house.

And next day, he took his place as "Paddy last" in his class, apparently as undisturbed as if there were no reckoning in store for him; or as if there had been in existence no such man as James Charles Buchmahon, master of the English Academy; and for a time George seemed perfectly right.

A good portion of the day wore on, George sat looking down on his book, his mouth, as if he were wondering at some crabbed Chinese manuscript. James Charles Buchmahon, after hearing many classes in rotation, stood, according to invariable custom, before his magisterial desk, scraping, and paring, and splitting, and nibbing pens, and placing them in most formal rows upon its outer ledge. The boys were all engaged, or seemingly so, in conning fresh tasks, until the pens should be quite ready to enable them to engage in writing their copies. During his progress of scraping and so on, James Charles Buchmahon, looking over his spectacles, and under his eyebrows, sent his searching glances round and round the room, nay, from each individual boy to the other. There was almost dead silence, as was usual in the school-room at this time every day, when the words "George Booth," pronounced in the slowest and most deep and solemn manner, by James Charles Buchmahon, sounded through the stilly school-room. George Booth looked in the well-known direction of the summoner—his miserable features suddenly jerking themselves, as it were, from their expression of inane stupidity into contortions and twistings of a horrible kind; and his terrified glance informed him that the fore-finger of a certain right hand was slowly beckoning him up to the judgment-seat. The fore-doomed wretch arose and advanced—now gulping down something, every other instant, as if he were vainly endeavoring to swallow back again the sickening fears that bubbled up from his heart.

"George Booth, you were yesterday absent from the English Academy."

"Yes, sir," (gulp).

"And pray where did you spend the day, George Booth?"

"In Sir John's wood, sir, picking nuts."

"Humph!" James Charles Buchmahon interrupted himself in his process of mending the pens, and stared straight forward, into poor George's blinking, pig's eyes, as if seriously endeavoring to make him out. The conference was resumed.

"Very good! And pray, Mr. George Booth, at whose suggestion did you go to Sir John's wood, to pick nuts?"

"At—"(a great gulp—another, and another)

"at Satan's, sir."

"At whose?"

"Satan's, sir."

James Charles Buchmahon now laid down the pen-knife, and placed the pen beside it, and there was another look into George's eyes, and through and through them, until it could almost be seen coming out at the back of his skull.

"Satan's, you say, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you be good enough, Mister George Booth, to say also in what manner Satan and you happened to interchange words on the subject?"

"Sir?"

"Where did you meet Satan, Mr. George Booth?"

"I saw him, sir, up—" George became at fault, and swallowed the air more violently than ever.

"Up where, pray?"

"Up—in the clouds, sir—at the top of Meeting-House Lane," the land that led directly from his own street into the country.

"Very good, again, sir. And pray what kind of a person is Satan?"

"He's—just—about your size, sir," and George bobbed his head, as if the confession he had made required something like an apologetic bow; while James Charles Buchmahon deliberately raised his cream-colored hat from his head, bowed very formally and politely in his turn, and then replaced his beaver. But oh! even George Booth could comprehend that this excessive politeness boded him no good.

"Well, sir, about my size, you say; will you please to favor me with a more detailed description? Was there any further likeness?"

"No, sir," George hastened to aver—"No, upon my word and credit, sir!"

"Well, sir—go on with your description."

"He was black, sir—and he had horns and the tail, sir;—and he had hoofs on him, sir, instead of shoes."

"I—see. Well, what words did he address to you?"

"George," says he—(gulp).

"Well, sir?"

"George," says he, "don't go to school to the English Academy to-day," says he."

"Well?"

"But go out to Sir John's wood," says he, "and pick nuts," says he—"there's the best nuts in the whole country there," says he."

"Any other conversation between you, sir?"

"No, sir."

During the last part of the catechism, James Charles Buchmahon had advanced a step, and now, with one blow, the unhappy being was stretched at full length upon the old oaked floor, which shuck under him, as he roared like a bull-calf.

This was, indeed, an unusual proceeding on the part of the systematic master of the English Academy, but it must be recollected that there was no boy in the school of sufficient years or strength to bear George Booth's weight upon his shoulders, so that George might have had the advantage of receiving ideas from the fangs of the cat-o'-nine-tails; while in the apprehension—or rather in the momentary fancy of James Charles Buchmahon, for, to this hour, even, he has not been able to arrive at certainty upon the point—some punishment became indispensable for George's attempt to enact the mere idiot.

And George Booth, from that day to this, through all the progress and changes of advanced life, has remained "last in his class," and seems quite satisfied with his position.

It is to be added, however, that very, very strange to say, after having become married, and after having swelled into a truly Falstaff shape, George, at the appointment of his wife, has turned schoolmaster himself; for she keeps a seminary, in which children are taught the first rude combinations of their alphabet; and he perhaps feels a re-acting pleasure in exercising his late-come power of torturing the poor little animals into a comprehension of a process which he himself could never understand.

Tommy Palmer comes next; he is called Tommy rather than Thomas, because he had been always so called in the old school-house, the sound of the word seeming more expressive of his character.

Tommy can scarce be recollected as racing about at play-hour, with the general throng, or as ever joining in a game of ball, or top, or of marbles. Neither was he ever at the head of his class, though by no means often at the tail of it. And yet he did not want power of body or of intellect, either for play or for study; he was only always ashamed of trying to compete with anybody in anything. *Mauvaise honte* was the devil that best him. He would blush suddenly, to the very top of his forehead, if abruptly spoken to, on the most indifferent subject; and if once he made a slip, in repeating his lesson, Tommy became so confounded that any attempt to mend the matter only plunged him, head over ears, into the most hellish state of confusion.

Once, while standing up in his class, Tommy was reading the anecdote in Sterne's Sentimental Journey, which gives an account of a French peasant's supper, and of a succeeding dance, before engaging in which, the young people took of their "sabots or wooden shoes." Tom read out very distinctly, "their sabots or wooden dishes."

"Wooden what-?" questioned James Charles Buchmahon.

"Wooden dishes, sir," repeated Tommy Palmer.

"Look at it, if you please, dearee," Tommy knew, as so did all the other boys, that the term "dearee," meant anything on earth but kindness.

But he looked on the book with the most intense anxiety, while James Charles looked him with the full power of his, large frozen, blue eyes.

"Well, dearee?"

"Wooden dishes," again read out poor Tommy Palmer.

"Open your eyes, pet, and try it again."

Taking the command literally, he elevated his eyebrows to their utmost stretch, and strained his eyes till their balls seemed ready to fall out; still, he could absolutely see nothing on the page but wooden dishes. James Charles Buchmahon advanced with the cat-o'-nine-tails, and the poor fellow felt her claws on the backs of his hands, on his head, and about his legs; still and still, "wooden shoes," as plain as the printer could print the words, were, to his vision, nothing but "wooden dishes."

Many years afterwards, Tommy Palmer was met by an old school-fellow in the throng of the great metropolis. His father had procured for him a situation in a government office. His old friend encountered him amid the roar and clatter of Fleet Street, and cordially and suddenly addressed him, holding out his hand. Tommy stepped back; staring, blushing, stammering, and wringing his fingers. In fact, to London he had carried—that excellent market for disposing of it—his whole stock of *mauvaise honte*, being about twenty-five years of age at the time; and, in his new position, on he went, blushing and stammering, and calling "wooden shoes" "wooden dishes," until, although no dunce, he was returned on