

# The True Witness,

AND

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## FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XXIX.—(Continued.)

In this situation, it cannot be said that Mary distinctly thought over anything; and yet her mind was thronged with a vast assembly of imperfect thoughts—snatches of reflections, and recollections, newly acquired ideas and sentiments, hopes, doubts, fears—the buzz of a great change going on within her; sometimes a swelling yet timid sense of her increasing importance; sometimes a sickening mistrust of herself; and all these abstractions dashed over, now and then, by realities which moved her very soul; her terrors of Darby Cooney, at one moment; her reliance upon Father Connell's power to protect her against him; her anxieties a contrary way, the next moment; fitting recurrences to Nelly Carty, the woman who had told her she was her daughter; but, through all, and pervading all, and above all, one master idea, that of Edmund Fenell. Was he well? Had he escaped Robin Costigan's revengeful intention? Mary had asked these questions of Mrs. Molloy, without obtaining any satisfactory replies. And why had he not been to see her ever since last night? And when would he come to see her? And was she to stay in the priest's house, or go to his?

Profoundly wrapt in her mental confusion, Mary did not perceive the approach of a person into the little arbor. Suddenly her wandering and downcast eye caught a glance of his feet, and she uttered a short shriek, and hid her face in her hands. But the good priest's voice reassured her.

She dropped on her knees, and in the whine of her old trade, not yet forgotten, poor thing! fervently thanked Father Connell for hiding her from Darby Cooney, and keeping him away; and prayed blessings from Heaven on the priest's head, for all his charities to her.

Had she been well since morning? Very well, and very happy? And was Mrs. Molloy good and kind to her?

Mary answered that she had been very well, and very happy; and that Mrs. Molloy was everything that heart could wish; and that Darby Cooney had never come "next or nigh her" the whole morning.

"And he never shall, my good little child," said Father Connell, "I will keep him away from you as long as you stay in this house, at least; I have the power over him to keep him away; I am stronger than Darby Cooney." Mary began to look puzzled. "Yes, my good little child, I am stronger than Darby Cooney; and all round my house, all round my little garden, and all round my chapel, there are guards to keep him away from you, my poor child; guards more courageous than soldiers—so, have no fears of Darby Cooney's hand now, or for the time to come."

During this speech, Mary glanced to the tops of the garden walls, and down the garden into the yard; but there were no guards to be seen, and some misgivings again possessed her for a moment; but it soon occurred to her that Father Connell was a good man, and had already done a great deal for her, so that whatever he said must be true, and she would believe it.

"An' shure Masther Neddy Fenell didn't come next or nigh me ever since last night either, sir," she resumed after a while; and expressing a new gratitude to her protector—"Did Darby Cooney do him any harm last night, sir?" An' was his house afire last night? An' can you tell me, sir why he is away all the morning? An' how soon will he come to see me?" Answering these questions in due order, Father Connell hesitated at the last two, and asked her, "But why do you want him to come and see you, my good child?"

"Och, that I may see him at the same time, an' talk to him, an' hear him talkin' to me; an' that I may be near him, an' lookin' at him—an' for ever thankin' my tender-hearted boy for his charity, an' his goodness to the poor shoddy girl."

"And why do you want to be looking at him, and talking to him, Mary?"

"Och, och, an' isn't it because the love is on my heart for him!"

It was Father Connell's duty, and it had been his intention, to frown at this easily foreseen declaration; but now he could not. On the contrary, smiles played around his lips, as he stared straight into Mary's face, and remained for a moment silent. And during that moment, he made up his mind to defer all further notice of the case, plainly seeing that it was one of unconscious error, which did not call for sternness or severity in his treatment of it. He resumed speaking, however—and it will be perceived that, before entering the little garden, he must have conferred with his house-keeper on her and Mary's adventures during the day.

"Well, poor child, well; and didn't Mrs. Molloy show you the chapel to-day?"

"Och, yis, sir, yis; an' 'tis itself that's the beautiful place, an' the grand place; an' there's a beautiful image hung up in it, that she told me was our blessed Lord dyin' on the cross to

redeem an' save us—an' och, sure enough, the blood was comin' down His side afore my eyes; did He make himself die, sir? did He kill himself?"

"No, Mary, no; sinners and wicked people nailed Him to that cross until He died upon it."

"Och, och, an' sure very wicked people they were; people like Darby Cooney, weren't they, sir? An' tell me this, sir, if you please; aren't you stronger nor Darby Cooney? an' shure you wouldn't let Darby Cooney nail you to a cross, to kill you? An' wasn't our blessed Lord stronger nor them wicked people? An' why didn't He keep 'em off, an' not let 'em nail Him to a cross and kill Him?"

While imparting instruction to a talented child, the most competent preceptor is often baffled by the child's point-blank questions. In answer to such questions a case of reasoning in series cannot with fitness or advantage be attempted, and, without this, the full dissipation of the child's doubt is impracticable. Regarding the present subject, in discussion between herself and Father Connell, poor Mary's mind was as that of a child, and her question was such a one as a child would put, and therefore Father Connell, smiling again, found a difficulty in meeting it. After a short pause, however, he went on.

"Yes, Mary, yes, my good little girl. He was stronger than all those wicked people, and stronger than all the people in the world, good as well as wicked; stronger than all the kings, and all the priests, and all the grandees, and all the armies of the world; stronger than the whole world, my good child; and if it had been His will, the whole world could not have hung Him upon that cross; but He did not use His strength against the wicked people, Mary; He let them put Him upon that cross, in order that He might redeem and save us."

"An' save us from what, sir?" Mary now repeated a former question, proposed to Mrs. Molloy.

"From the punishment due to our sins, my poor child; from the punishment due to our sins."

Mary paused, and evidently tried in her mind to understand this proposition; but Father Connell, watching her, saw that she could not—nor had he expected that she could. Suddenly, however, her eyes and cheeks glowed; suddenly she gave up the cold process of reasoning; suddenly she felt the truth, and said:—

"Och, och, an' it was a great love that He had on his heart for us, sir."

"That's it, that's it, my good child," resumed Father Connell, seizing, and of course squeezing hard both of Mary's hands. "That's the very thing, my poor, poor girl; that's the very answer to your own question, as truly given as if all the doctors of all the colleges in the wide world had found it out for you; come in now, Mary, my dear; we will talk of this, and of a great deal more, another time; but not soon, not very soon, Mary; with God's help, Mary, you will be a good child, a very good child. Come in now; come in till we see what Mrs. Molloy has to give us for our dinner: Mrs. Molloy is a good woman, Mary, only a little rough spoken now and then—a very good woman; and Mrs. Molloy is beginning to love you, Mary; and if you are good to her, and submissive to her, I am very sure she will love you better and better day by day. Come in now, Mary, come in. Peggy!" he cried out, as they approached the house? and "Peggy" resounded through it, as Father Connell and his new favorite crossed its threshold.

From that day forward Father Connell did not prematurely engage in difficult questions of religion with the beggar-girl. As if he had to instruct a mere child, indeed, he led her on, step by step, through its more flowery paths, and almost according to the routine course of childhood.

Mrs. Molloy, and some good religious women who resided together in the neighborhood—the same who, dressed in white linen cloaks, sang during vespers, inside the railings of the altar—taught her her prayers, day after day, and finally her catechism. Father Connell often overseeing them, or calling on Mary, as her lessons went on, to account for the faith that was in her; and his occasional conversations with Mary never were without some questions on her part, regarding her new and delightful stock of knowledge, which it was most pleasing to him, as her comprehension grew more enlarged, to answer satisfactorily. Her progress was surprising. In about nine months the priest deemed her fit to approach her first communion; and she was also baptized on the same day. Oh, happy, happy was Mary, while she went through the business of that day, clad in her white muslin dress, and her cap with white ribbons in it. Happy, and yet fearful; proud of the day, and of herself, and yet the humblest of the humble. It was a time of flowers, too, and Mary had them all around her.

But Father Connell encountered a little impression. Recurrence must again be made to the first days she spent under his roof. Her question of—"Bud when would Masther Neddy Fenell come?" was almost ceaseless, and the priest at first only told her why he could not come. His old master was so ill, and he

was so much engaged. "But if the whole world was dyin' I'd go see my tender-hearted boy," she said. Nick M'Grath died, and she allowed some days to lapse, but then repeated her question. Father Connell now met her with an account of Edmund's great occupation in superintending the old man's affairs, and with a statement of his newly acquired riches according to the will made in his favor by his master. Mary was glad he was so rich, but sorry that his great business kept him away. Days passed over, and she said she should like to go out on the roads, and walk here and there.—The priest himself accompanied her forth, and led her for a walk by the adjacent river's brink a delightful walk, during the course of which everything around her was arrayed in nature's fully-matured gorgeousness. Thoroughly did she enjoy this recreation; but still she came back to Father Connell's house dispirited, and feeling a great want.

Some more days passed on, and Father Connell told her that Edmund Fenell was to come and dine with him, previous to his going a great, great way off—to Dublin, in fact—there to engage in new pursuits, which the good man tried to explain to her. Mary changed color, but listened meekly, and only said—"God spread the good luck, an' the happiness in his road, wherever he goes."

Edmund did come to dine with Father Connell, and Mary was summoned to speak with him in the parlor, in Father Connell's presence; but though her heart at first bounded to meet his, and though herself first bounded forward to be encircled in his arms, and though Edmund was not wanting in all show of affectionate interest, still the poor girl began to feel vaguely that there was in future to be a distance measured between them, and she retired weeping to her kitchen. Dinner came on, and she received the impression more strongly, when she observed that Edmund and Father Connell dined together, and that she and Father Connell's servant dined together.

Edmund was retiring for the evening—the last he was to spend for some time in his native city. Mary was again called in, that he might bid her farewell. She entered the parlor with a humiliated and touching air—but not a bit of ill temper in it. Edmund shook her hands, kissed her cheek, and spoke still most affectionately to her. In return, she kissed his lips and prayed the blessing of God "on his road, wherever he went." He left the house, attended to the outside door by Father Connell. The priest returned to Mary, and found her sitting stupefied on the floor.

"When he was a very little boy, my poor child," the priest said, "he promised you if ever he should be rich, he would share his riches with you; and now, my poor child, see whether he does or not—only see;" and he emptied a purse of gold into her lap.

Mary put her hand under the guineas and let them drop, almost one by one, back again into her lap, and at last dolefully said—"May the good God reward him for his charity; but I'd rather have the love from Neddy Fenell than all this gold, sir."

But in some time Mary became contented with her lot; and then, more than contented—happy. Day by day, a great and revering love for her protector sprang up in her heart, nearly to the exclusion of the former sentiment. Her religious duties, too, engrossed her, and very soon, Father Connell called in Mick Dempsey to engage her mind in fresh studies; and her progress in reading and writing—in reading, in fact, so as to be able to occupy and interest herself—was as surprising as was that which she had made in higher pursuits.

But her witnessing casually Edmund Fenell's marriage with Helen M'Neary, from her secret position in the little hall, proved, as regarded her love for him, a great drawback upon all her acquired discipline in the conduct of her young heart.

## CHAPTER XXX.

Twenty-five, or twenty-six miles to the north-east of Father Connell's city, and in another county, there stood, in the times of which we write, what had been a good country mansion, now in ruins. Its living owner, as he was also the owner of a very considerable tract of adjacent acres, had never been seen by the dwellers on his noble estate. In fact he resided in nabob style in another country.

In his despatches to his agents, his constant cry was, like the gnome, for "more, more," and in the highly civilized land in which he sojourned, desperate, and unteachable savages he called those from whom he drew his ample income, never admitting, meanwhile, that the merciless exactions inflicted on his wretched tenantry, by his agents, to meet the insatiable craving for "more, more," had made those deserted people poor beyond endurance, and necessarily reckless and fierce towards all whom they considered as the causes of their oppression. But our history can have little to do with this matter, further than that we are bound to allude to it, in order to show how it was that the once noble mansion was now visited by ruin—the ruin of neglect rather than of time.

A flight of many steps ascended to its hall-door, but the balustrade at either hand had

tumbled down; and grass grew up through the joints of the steps, which were loose under foot. No glass was in any of the windows, and in some were fragments of sashes only; while their shutters, which had been closed, never to be re-opened, fifty years before, had either partially or totally decayed, and when the wind was high, their remnants flapped or creaked dismally. The once solid hall-door was rotten, and, although the iron bolt on the inside still held it in its place, it could very easily be opened. The sashes, frames, and shutters of the windows on the lower story were altogether gone; and the brood of a surly old sow could occasionally be seen scampering in and out through them in full career, and at their unbridled pleasure. Most of the aged trees of the adjacent park were denuded of their branches: the fish-ponds, to the right and left of the house, were a mass of aquatic weeds, emitting an unwholesome vapor; the shrubberies were choked up with bramble and briar, their neatly sanded walks no longer visible; everything around you had an air of chilly neglect and dilapidation.

The park was rented by a farmer, whose thatched dwelling arose in one of its most picturesque spots. Some time before the period with which we are concerned, this person sent one of his laborers to the house, a distance off, with instructions to fix himself in some sheltered nook of the ruined dwelling, and act as care-taker for his employer. (One night only did the man hold his post; for so dreadful a night had that proved to him, that, as he said and swore, he would not accept the whole year's rent of the estate to pass another like it. There had been such rattling of chains, and stamping of feet up and down the old stair-cases, and such frightful laughter in remote parts of the crumbling edifice, and such calling him by his name, and altogether such a hellish uproar and revelry as never was known in this world before.)

A long, straight, broad avenue, perfectly arched over-head by the junction of two rows of very old oaks, ran from the house to the public road. We should rather say that these oaks traced out the course of an avenue that had been; for no distinction at present existed between the grassy way under foot, and the land at its either side. Years before, a massive iron gate had guarded the entrance to the avenue; but half of it was now clean gone, and the other half, broken of its hinges, was supported by an abutment of loose stones, while a low barrier, of similar materials, fenced up the space where the other half had stood; and thus were the grounds at that side protected against trespassers.

A crumbling wall swept in a curve at either side of this old gateway; and it was with surprise that the farmer who rented the park discovered, early one morning—so early that it was yet twilight—to one side of it, a hastily constructed and most wretched hut, which certainly had not been there the previous night. A shapeless and unsightly structure it might indeed be called, been neither round, nor square, nor oblong—a truly unmathematical rhomboid. Its walls, if such an unartificial heaping up of sods, stones, and mud, could be so termed, were not more than three feet high; a few boughs stretched across these, with furze heaped over them, formed its roof; and some furze still, with one or two bundles of straw, nearly covered up the mouth of the den.

On a large stone placed before this suddenly built hut, the farmer discovered part of a delphic plate, having one half-penny as nearly as possible in the middle of it; and this denoted that charity was expected from the passers-by; while on another stone sat an individual whom the farmer could not, in his own mind, call either man or boy.

By his height and his beardless chin he seemed indeed to be a boy; but then his surly brow, his scowling eye, his dogged mouth, the absence of boyish plumpness in his cheeks, his long and muscular arms, his broad chest and shoulders, together with the shape of his tattered attire, appeared on the contrary to characterize him as a man.

Such huts as this described, wherein the wandering mendicant, suddenly seized with fever, or otherwise assailed by disease so as to hinder him from proceeding on his way, stretches himself, until he either gets better or dies—may often be met with on an Irish roadside; and they are generally erected by the neighboring peasantry to guard against the introduction of contagious illness into their crowded families. And no one knew this better than the honest farmer at present before us. But here was a wigwag constructed in one night—by whom? No hands in the neighborhood had, to his knowledge, been employed in the work, and indeed none could have been without his becoming acquainted with the fact. Was the strange looking guardian of the den its sole architect and builder? Our friend grew very uncomfortable as he took a second glance at him and it. In the whole expression of the non-descript creature, seated on the second large stone, there was something indeed unnatural and impish; and, in the grey dimness of the early and lonesome morning, the rude, misshapen hut seemed only like, the apparition

of one which he might have called up, as he would a mushroom, almost in an instant, from the earth, but which, supposing it of earthly material—his hands—were they human hands—could never have begun and finished in the course of a single night.

The farmer took heart, however, to address his new acquaintance, who, in most morose tones, gave him to understand that he was certainly the sole workman engaged in the building of the rude hospital; and, moreover, that his old grandfather now lay within it in a raging fever, as could plainly be seen and known by any one who would come close and look in.

The inquirer, gaining more courage, did approach nearer, and heard moans and incoherent ravings; and when afterwards talking over the matter with his neighbors, he added, that through the small aperture of the kennel not blocked up by furze and straw, the wilddest eyes and the most frightful face he had ever seen had once or twice glared up and been turned towards him.

But his neighbors, and indeed himself afterwards, attributed to the influence of fever the expression of those eyes and of that face; and general compassion for the afflicted and aged man was felt throughout the neighborhood, under the influence of which he was supplied with every aid and nourishment that rustic sympathy and skill could afford or prescribe.

Neither was his unamiable nurse neglected, being furnished with such humble fare as the peasantry could bestow. But as to nightly lodging it was generally believed and feared, that boy or man, whichever he might be, he used to pass his nights quite independently in some corner of the ruined mansion, in which the farmer's stout steward had refused to take up his quarters.

Although the people of the vicinity thus exercised their charity towards the occupant of the uncouth hut and his grandson, there arose amongst them, however, after a while, whispers by no means favorable either to the one or to the other, and of a nature that inspired a vague dread of both. For it became noticed that the self-called grandson was by no means diligent in his attendance on his patient; that for the greater portion of a day he was not to be seen near him; nay, that for three or four days together he had been away, no one knew where. The contrast between his youthful appearance and the expressions of his features; his manners and habits, so little in accordance with boyhood, or even with humanity; his thanklessness for favors, and his piggish answers to all who spoke to him, next told against the mysterious newcomer. He had, besides, severely and viciously hurt two children, while at their play in the fields; and as a climax to his abominable practices, a little anecdote must be related.

A favorite brood hen, belonging to one of the adjacent cottagers, became missing. When looked after, it was found suspended by the neck from the bough of a tree, quite dead—very well hung, in fact—and the dark-browed boy-man, with his arms folded, was, at the same time, observed seriously contemplating it. When questioned on the subject, he deigned to assume a devilish grin, while he answered:—

"I wanted to see the way a fellow would die when he'd be hanged on the gallows."

"Lord save us an' keep us!" said the woman, whose pet hen had suffered under the young philosopher's experiment; "an' why did you want to know that?"

"For a reason I have; tell me this—if I knocked your brains out wid this stone, wouldn't I be hanged?"

The woman pressed her thumb hard against her forehead, repeatedly making the sign of the cross as she retreated, without asking another question.

Then, as to the sick person whom he called grandfather. This individual in a little time began occasionally to be seen near the mouth of his wigwag on all-fours, as if he could not better support himself, or was not yet sufficiently recovered to stand upright. But there was some doubt about this fact of his continued incapacity for locomotion. One person positively asserted, that while engaged in the middle of the night watching for a dog that had committed depredations on the sheep in the neighboring park, he had seen pass very near him, in his ambush, a figure with long grey hair floating about its shoulders, hobbling away in the direction of the ruined house, but hobbling with great rapidity, however; and although the night was very still no sound came from the footfall of the figure. The startled watchman shouted out; the figure turned its head, and now he could almost swear that he beheld, in the clear moonshine, the fearful eyes, which that very day had glared upwards at him, from the interior of the sick man's hospital. But a noise, as if from the dog for which he was on the watch, here made him look in another direction, and when he again would have studied the questionable apparition, no one appeared in view.

The man hastily gave up his watching post and crossing the park, made his way down the avenue to the hut outside its ruined gate. At a glance he became assured that its disagreeable guardian was not visible; but this was