

The True Witness,

AND

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, DEC. 22, 1871.

NO. 19.

FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Since Tom Naddy's boyish days, when, it will be recollected, he got Ned Fennell into trouble, on the score of a certain letter, Father Connell had found him attentive, faithful, honest, and seemingly religious, and, therefore, placed full reliance in Tom. All doubt of his want of truth left the good man's mind; and he had consequently received his late communications with implicit faith. Indeed, such was Father Connell's virtuous and primitive character, that he could not even suspect dissimulation in any one whom he once trusted. And these facts, joined with Tom's inimitable plausibility of speech and manner, ensured success to him on the present occasion.

Shortly after nightfall, on that day, three persons, silently ushered in by Mrs. Molloy, entered the priest's parlor. They were Edmund Fennell, Helen McNeary, and Miss Bessy Lanigan.

Even under the circumstances, and with the accompaniments, which attend a marriage celebrated in the more usual way—amidst the blessings of parents—crowds of friends—publicity and banquetting—there is something of doubt, of awe, of uncertainty for the future, which oppresses, even unto sorrow, a right-minded and pure-hearted girl.

But much more than this Helen McNeary must have felt, in her present situation. She had stolen through the gloom of the evening, and in disguise, to vow her marriage vow, under the ministry of a clergyman, not of her own religious creed. Excepting her future husband, she came supported but by one friend, and that one an individual for whom she had but little respect. No father stood by her side, to give her away and to bless her—she wore no bridal ornaments nor robe; and her single bridesmaid was in a similar predicament. All this had a most depressing effect upon her spirits. But there was much more to weigh her down. She now felt that she had consented to this private marriage hastily, and more in anger against her father's peremptory measures than—withstanding her love for Edmund Fennell—in a conviction of its absolute necessity, or even of the force of the arguments which had been used to persuade her to the step; and altogether, upon entering the priest's humble little house, she experienced a sense of unmaidenly impropriety, that sunk her in her own estimation, and a terror of future consequences, which made her heart sick.

She crossed the threshold of the priest's parlor door. He sat alone to a little table, stern, sorrowful, cheerless; the ray of his single economical candle was cheerless too. His eye met Helen's; there was something in it which made her tremble. Father Connell merely bowed his head to his breast, as the party one and all saluted him. Edmund felt his bride hang heavier upon his arm.

And Edmund became almost as much agitated as was Helen. He knew his old benefactor well, and he felt certain that this cold silence, so different from Father Connell's usual cheerfulness of manner, betokened anything but approval of the marriage which was about to ensue.

Slowly rising, after he had lowered his head, the priest motioned them to sit down. He then bent his knees on the chair from which he had arisen, covered his face with his hands, and apparently prayed. Perhaps he detected himself in a greater show of harshness, towards the poor young couple, than he had promised them, and that a portion of his prayers petitioned for grace to bear with them, more like a Christian. After some time, he stood up again, put on his stole, and turning over the leaves of his missal, he fixed his eyes on the little group, and said, in a sad and solemn tone—"Come forward—I am ready."

Edmund and Miss Lanigan immediately rose; but Helen remained sitting. Edmund held out his arm to her. She made one or two unavailing efforts to take it.

"Why do you not come forward?" inquired the old priest.

Edmund answered, in a whisper, and with a choking throat, "Miss McNeary is not very well, sir; but she will recover soon—she has fainted, sir."

Father Connell almost ran across the room; he saw the fair young girl insensible and helpless; he saw her usually brilliant cheek pale as paper; his sternness vanished in an instant, his features relaxed into a benign expression of compassion and anxiety, and he took in his one of her cold, deadened hands, and chafed it eagerly.

"God bless you, God bless you, my poor child," he murmured in tones of shivering tenderness.

Helen McNeary stirred, sighed, looked up into his face, let fall her forehead on his hand, and burst into agonies of tears.

"Don't—don't cry, my poor child; God is good, and he will give you grace, and strength, and repentance; put your trust in the Lord, my dear child, and he will support you. Peg-

gy! Peggy!" he cried out, in his loudest voice. Peggy, who was quite within hail, was very soon at her master's elbow.

"Peggy, this poor, dear little child, this good, charitable little girl, is very ill and weakly—Peggy, you know what would be good for her, better than I do—Peggy," he added in a whisper, "don't you think a glass of wine would do her good? I think it would, Peggy."

"Why thin, what else in the world wide, would do her half so much good?" questioned Peggy, dogmatically.

"I am much recovered now, sir," said Helen McNeary, once more looking up, with streaming eyes, into his face.

"Oh, you will be better, my dear, you will be better. Peggy, go into the closet," he pointed to one in which the wine for the altar was kept—"I know there is some wine on the shelf; bring it here quickly."

Peggy soon obeyed his commands; her coarse exterior covered a tender heart—provided always that Peggy was allowed her own method of indulging its impulses. Under her soothing attentions, Helen gradually grew stronger and more collected.

Father Connell regained the further side of the room. Under the influence of this accidental appeal to his compassion, scarce a trait of his severity of manner remained. And as soon as Helen was quite able to engage in the ceremony, she and Edmund Fennell were, by his ministry, united as husband and wife, "to have and to hold" until death. Peggy was allowed to be a witness on the occasion; and it was with the heartiest good will, that she saw "her own dear boy," married to so lovely a partner for life.

Upon Peggy's hasty entrance into the parlor, she had left the door open; from the position, in which Edmund and Helen stood up to the ceremony, they could see out through it, into the almost perfectly dark hall. The priest had scarcely ended his official duties, when Helen fancied she descried, leaning against the wall of the hall, a female figure. Starting back, and glancing again, she became sure that a living thing did flit away, through the darkness, out of view. The next moment, from some place in the house, more distant than the hall, the low, and seemingly smothered wailing of a young, and very musical voice, was heard, accompanied by a slight noise, as if of gentle clapping of hands. Father Connell looked at Peggy, somewhat reprehensively, and Peggy looked at him deprecatingly; and then she left the room, now carefully closing the door after her. The next moment, the low wailing, with its accompaniment, were heard no longer. Helen wondered, and even vaguely feared something, but made no inquiries of any one.

This little incident scarcely occupied as much time, as could cause any interruption to the business going on. Father Connell now turned to Edmund.

"Edmund Fennell," he said, "these ladies, your wife, and her friend, will pardon us, if we leave them together, for a moment. Come you with me. I wish to hold some conversation with you. Follow me."

Edmund accordingly walked after the old clergyman, up to his bedroom;—the little parlor was the only reception room in the house.

"Sit down there, Neddy Fennell," Father Connell pointed to a chair, while he fastened the door. He then paced for a considerable time up and down, and at length spoke again.

"Neddy Fennell, I have brought you here, to hold some very serious discourse with you. I have brought you here, to try if the words of your old friend, and your old priest, will have any weight with you. Will you be attentive to me, Neddy Fennell?"

"I will, sir—thoroughly and reverently attentive."

"Well! And you must make me a promise, beforehand, Neddy Fennell. You must promise me that you will not even attempt to reply to anything I shall say, unless I require an answer to a question."

"Anything that you point out, sir. I will obey."

"That is not a distinct answer to my distinct proposition. You are to promise, that you will not reply to my words—that you are to remain perfectly silent—unless I ask you a question—do you promise that?"

"I do, sir."

Neddy Fennell, I have been a friend to you, because I loved you. From your infancy I loved you; from the very first day that you came to give your childish assistance at the altar of God, I loved you. A change came over your life, even while you were yet a child, and you wanted a hand to be held out to you, and my hand was so held out to you;—and I do not now mention these things through vainglory—God forbid I did—but from the necessity of the case before us.

"And I tried to do you more good, much more good than this. By precepts, and I humbly hope by example, I tried to fill your heart with the fear and the love of God. But I did not expect that you were to pay me back my love of you, and my care for you, with worldly goods; I will tell you, however, what I did expect. I did expect and believe, that you would have shown your sense of thankfulness to me, by honoring and serving the Lord. Neddy Fennell, you have disappointed me; sorely disappointed me, and sorely, sorely afflicted me."

"Gracious Heavens, sir!—I—"

"Remember your promise, and listen to me, Neddy Fennell," Father Connell raised his finger, and frowned on the young man. "Neddy Fennell, you have sinned a great sin."

"Father Connell! hear me, sir!"

"Silence, you Edmund Fennell! and again remember your promise—remember it literally. I will not hear you at present; at a future time I will. It is now your duty to attend to my counsel, and to let me gain a future hope for you, by witnessing your docility, and your humility under your priest's reproof."

"The only recompense, Neddy Fennell, I will ever ask, or receive from you, for my love to you your whole life long, is your solemn resolution, to avoid, from this day forward, future sin; and to keep that resolution, and to be sorry, and to repent for the past—be silent. I command you once more, or I must think that you are impatient of your old priest's rebuke, and that would be a bad sign indeed."

"You are now, though a very young man, a married man. No matter what may have occurred up to this moment, you are bound to love and cherish your wife; to love her above all, except your God; to be faithful and true to her; to cherish her beyond yourself, or the whole world besides;—you solemnly engage to do this, with God's assistance?"

"With God's assistance, sir, I most solemnly engage to do this."

"I hope you will; nay, I almost—I quite believe you will, and indeed, indeed, I will pray that you may obtain the grace to do so. Neddy Fennell, up to this very moment, I love you; and I have just proved it to you. Answer me this question, and answer it truly. When you came here this evening, had you any knowledge of the danger that I should run, in marrying you to that poor child? Answer me this truly, as if you were replying at the judgment-seat."

"I solemnly protest, sir, as if I were answering at the judgment-seat, that I did not know you must incur any danger, by uniting us in marriage."

"And, Neddy, notwithstanding all that has passed, I believe what you now say. I do not think you would willingly subject your old friend, and your priest, to the peril in which I have voluntarily placed myself. For, Neddy, I have, this night, subjected myself to a felon's punishment for your sake, and, as I said before, out of my love for you. To save you from continued sin, I have married you to a Protestant; and, if, for doing this, I be prosecuted and convicted, the law of the land will send me, a banished felon, from this country. Its punishment for my act is, transportation beyond the seas for life."

"Merciful powers!" cried Edmund, starting up, "why was I ignorant of this law? Oh, my dear, my beloved, and venerated father, I knew not what I was doing!"

"I have told you, Neddy Fennell, that I believed your former assertion on the point—And yet, with my eyes open, I did this for you, and you cannot, therefore, doubt that I love you still. Now, attend to me again."

"I have loved you ever since you were a little child—I have proved that I love you yet. You have been criminal—repent, amend, atone. Above all things, mark my words; take your wife to your bosom; cast no word of reproach or slight upon her; be unto her true, loving, tender, and cherishing; if you wish to show me that you are grateful, this is the gratitude I look for! Lead a good life, and let your wife find in you a Christian husband. As you hope for a future blessing, and if you value my death-bed prayers, do all this, my son."

Ned Fennell threw himself on his knees before the old man, clasping both his hands together.

"Just as you now are," said Father Connell, holding his right arm on high, "just as you now are, renew the promise before Heaven and me."

"Before Heaven, and before you, sir. I renew the promise to do all this."

"Well. Rise now." The priest offered him his hand, and as he obeyed, gave it one of the old squeezes to which it was so well accustomed. Still, however, he was grave and reserved, though not severely so.

"And, Neddy Fennell, we will now go down stairs, and you will take your wife to you and comfort her, and love her. You must call to see me to-morrow, that we may confer on your future plans; and how far this circumstance may have to do with them. I fear that it will have a great deal to do with them. But we will hope for the best. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."

He led Edmund by the hand to his bride. The young couple, with their friend, arose to depart. He accompanied them to the outer door of his little premises, and there, before bidding them good-night, gave them anew his hearty and affectionate benediction.

CHAPTER XXIX.

On the night of the fire in Nick M'Grath's hay-loft, and previous to that occurrence, it will be brought to mind, that after his inter-

view with the beggar-girl in Joan Flaherty's house, Edmund Fennell paid a visit, on her account, to Father Connell. He communicated to the old man all he knew concerning her.—He described the shocking outrages, which, to his own knowledge, she constantly endured from Robin Costigan; fully detailing the scene he had witnessed from the top of the dividing wall, when he was a little boy, and an inmate of Nelly Carty's cabin. He dwelt on the poor girl's terror of the old beggarman; her tears and wailings; her rooted dislike of the life she was leading under his rule; her wish to change that life, and escape from Costigan; and her ever-recurring dread, that if she attempted to do so, her fearful tyrant would inevitably track her out, and kill her. He reminded the priest of her utter ignorance of religion, a fact which Father Connell himself had ascertained; but enlarged on her religious tendencies, notwithstanding, discoverable in her hatred of what was good and generous; her appreciation of a charitable act; and her meek submission under cruel persecution.

Passing from his boyish, almost childish acquaintance with poor Mary, Edmund then took up an account of their re-meeting, after an interval of so many years, in Nick M'Grath's shop that very evening. He proceeded with their conversation in one of the shower of houses. Father Connell, struck with a new interest, although he had been sufficiently interested before, drew from Edmund, by continued questions, a very minute statement of this interview; not only as to what was said during it, but also as to what had occurred between the two young people. The lad could not help blushing, but he was perfectly able to meet every inquiry with the consistency of fearless truth. His old protector proposed other questions, and he also met them to the priest's satisfaction. It could not be denied, he admitted, that the poor, untaught young girl, regarded him with feelings that would have been improper, if indulged, as she seemed to indulge them, by any person at all instructed on moral, social, or religious points; but Edmund submitted that from the whole experience of her young life, it was impossible she could ever have been taught the impropriety of giving way to such feelings; indeed, her very avowals of them, open and ingenuous as they were, proved as much; and did they not also prove another thing? Did they not also prove, that she herself did not know the tendency, the range, the very nature of all that she now vaguely and inconspicuously felt.

Father Connell laid his hand on Edmund's shoulder, and smiling benignly, nodded to him at once an assent to his proposition and an encouragement to go on.

Availing himself of the permission, Edmund proceeded to relate, how, according to Mary's own account, she still suffered from the gross and brutal treatment of Costigan; how her aversion to her present course had even increased since Edmund and she last met, but how, at the same time, her fear of being murdered by Costigan bound her to it. He turned to her aspirations after a good and virtuous life; to the truth of her sentiments towards all, in outward nature, from which she had had an opportunity of studying a good lesson; to the gifted order of her mind, evident through all the clouds of neglect, and of youthful sorrow which hung around it. He ventured to allude to the great beauty of her person and features; nor was his old listener displeased with the allusion; for beauty of heart has a certain pure and holy sympathy, even in the breast of well-disciplined age, with outward personal beauty in youth; and Edmund, waxing eloquent, concluded by asking Father Connell to decide whether it would not be a charitable and delightful action to rescue, for society and for God, a creature like Mary Cooney, by snatching her from the power of Robin Costigan, from his murderous threats, and his probable execution of them; and from his evil ways and bad example, a continuance in, and observation of which, might, notwithstanding her present dispositions, end in her moral ruin.

"I will ask you only one question more, Neddy Fennell, my child," said Father Connell; "and you will answer that question truly—I know you will, Neddy."

"I will, sir."

"I know very well you will, Neddy. What are your own feelings towards this poor, young creature?"

"I pity her from my heart, sir; I have a great respect and regard for her keeping herself so long good, in the midst of wicked example; I have a great interest in her future well-doing; and I feel towards her, slight as our acquaintance has been, the full friendship that a brother feels for a sister."

"And you have no other feelings for her?"

"None, sir."

"Then, Neddy, my child, she shall indeed, with God's blessing, be saved from Robin Costigan's hand. He shall not kill either her body or her soul; no, Neddy, that wicked man shall not. I will take her from him. Under this poor roof she shall have an opportunity, at least, of growing to be a good woman, and a useful woman, and a faithful servant of the

Lord. I will go this very evening and take her from Robin Costigan; ay, and I'll make him give her up to me without a word. I am not afraid of the bad man, Neddy; no, I am not afraid of him, Neddy, my child. And go you home, now, Neddy, to your business for the night; go you home to your good old master's house; and go straight home to it. And may you have a reward, Neddy, for your charitable and for your virtuous intentions towards that poor, untaught, unbefriended orphan child. Good-night, Neddy, and take my blessing. I will see Mary Cooney this very evening."

But Father Connell was detained at home by a visitor, on business of a most urgent nature, too long to perform his promise. Indeed it was much past his usual hour for retiring to bed, when the person went away. Some time after, the fire-bell struck on his ear. He hurried into the town with strong fears, as has been seen, for Ned Fennell; and all that he did subsequently is also known. In the first early night of the morning he led the poor beggar-girl home.

His house-keeper, Mrs. Molloy, had not been left quite unacquainted with his intentions towards Mary Cooney. In fact, it was the house-keeper's opinion that Father Connell had consulted her, very confidentially, on the matter; nay, in order to reconcile her to the introduction of a new inmate into her establishment, that he had made a very powerful appeal to her feelings; and this, even Mrs. Molloy's sense of her own respectability could not withstand. She was, therefore, prepared to receive poor Mary with something akin to graciousness of manner.

At Mrs. Molloy's kitchen fire, then, Mary was soon sitting, barched, barefooted, and otherwise half-clothed; the scraps of attire which she did wear being wet from the inclemency of the day before; while her little feet were splashed with puddle, and blood-stained, too, from the bleeding of sore cracks and wounds in them.

Tears were in her eyes, smiles were on her lips, and short, happy sighs fluttered every moment, like so many small birds let loose one after the other, from the depths of her heart.—She looked around her, scanning the humble little kitchen; it was a drawing room to her; never in her life before had she sat to such a fire, nor in an apartment half so luxurious—so sumptuous. She looked at Mrs. Molloy, and at her high-heeled shoes and at her high-crowned cap, and deemed her a person of very great importance; and Mrs. Molloy was not slow in observing the effect her superiority had produced; and thus Mary was all the better of her mute and unconscious sympathy.

Father Connell having warned and commanded his house-keeper not to speak for the present with the beggar-girl, on her own affairs, and his house-keeper obeying him, for a wonder, few words, except words of kindness, passed between her and the young stranger at her hearth. She busily engaged herself preparing the priest's breakfast; and at all her proceedings Mary still looked on, with wonder and curiosity.

Father Connell had been out about an hour. He now returned, and called out from the parlor for "Peggy!" and Peggy, answering his summons, found that he had brought home a pair of shoes and a pair of stockings, for his new protegee, together with materials, very humble indeed, for dressing her out from head to foot. But until the latter could be made up, he earnestly consulted Peggy upon the best thing to be done, towards obtaining present substitutes for them. Peggy, after a pause, and bargaining for permission to have her own way in the matter, sallied forth from the house, and quickly came back, laden, however she had procured them, with a little stock of the necessaries required. They had been used, indeed, but were clean, neat, and respectable, and Mrs. Molloy averred, would fit Mary to a T, for she thanked Providence she had eyes in her head. Her master approving of everything, Mrs. Molloy swept the table clear of its little heap of habiliments ready made and raw materials for the same; and the next instant, she and her young friend were busily engaged in the house-keeper's room, off the kitchen.

Father Connell would not—could not sit down to breakfast, pending the great change that was going on under his roof. He walked about his parlor, bolt upright, champeering the palms of his hands, very, very fast, and smiling smiles, as fresh as those of childhood. At last, the parlor door opened, and Mary Cooney abutious, and the other business of the toilet all gone through, appeared before him; Mrs. Molloy—as if Mary bodily and altogether were of her construction, and not merely the tie of the beau-knot of her cap, leading her in, with an air of great self-approbation. The old man stood still, and his smiling features half changed into an expression of surprise, at the vision of the beautiful creature he now gazed upon. Her newly polished face, burning with blushes, caused by her shyness of her fine clothes, and her blue eyes scintillating and enlarged, with a new-come excitement, the beggar-girl did appear, indeed, surpassingly lovely.

He was struck too with her likeness to Helen McNeary—as any one might have been.