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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER X.

So full of the idea of Robin Costigan—the man that had been nearly twice hung, thirty-five years ago, and yet at present was alive—so full of this unique personage was Neddy Fennell's head, that for hours he could not sleep. He felt, above all things, great curiosity, to see distinctly the features of the fellow, towards whom he could not avoid indulging prepossessions of awe and terror, along with those of strong dislike and distrust. Neddy's terror was not, however, of the cowardly kind.

At last he did sleep, but his slumbers were disturbed, with dream after dream of the fearful robber, and each of the most distressingly nervous kind; until at last he started awake again, trembling and shuddering, and bathed in perspiration.

The darkness around him was so deep, that "a horror of it," as is sublimely said in the holy writings, "fell upon him." The wintry winds abroad whistled and piped around the half-rotten hovel which enclosed him, and sometimes, swelling into a great rage, pushed and jostled, as it were, against its mud walls until they shook again. Presently, a weak cry of human sorrow, mingled, he thought, with the alternate wailing, and howling, and roaring of the blast. He quickly sat up or his straw couch, and listened intently. The cries were repeated, he became quite sure; and more, they came over the boundary wall between him and Robin Costigan's lodging.

He continued to listen. In one of the half pauses of the tempest, the poor, weak cry changed into a smothered shriek, immediately after the sound, as if of a heavy blow, had reached Neddy's ears.

"Helo there!" he suddenly screamed out, his shrill, young voice piercing above the various noises of the wind.

All sounds ceased in the neighboring hut. He listened attentively, still neither the poor weak cry, nor the blow, nor the shriek, was repeated. He dropped asleep again; and, as the first peep of day struggled, doubtless unwillingly, through the atmosphere of the shower of houses, Neddy was up and out, washing his face in the snow, drifted before the house-door, half in great glee, half in a luxurious feeling of refreshment; and when his toilet had been completed, the light-hearted boy industriously fell to work making snow-balls, piling them pyramidally at his side, and peering around him in every direction for the approach of some foe, against whom he might discharge them.

In the twilight of the bleak and bitter winter morning, not many objects of enmity appeared, however, stirring abroad; but the few who did appear within range of his battery, soon felt a snow-shot breaking about their ears; for Master Neddy Fennell had often shared in a "peeing-match" of no very playful character, between the mutually abhorring boys of two rival schools; so that from practice, his aim, particularly when directed against a human cranium, became almost unerring.

He was pausing for a new enemy; none appeared; but the patched and tattered door of Joan Flaherty's abode uttered a squeak, and then it slowly opened a little, and a man's head, thickly covered with matted grey hair, protruded itself through the opening, and now turned one way, and now another, as if, by the agency of its proper eyes, taking an observation of the weather.

"The old robber's head!" thought Neddy, frowning and setting his teeth, and looking hard to make out Robin Costigan's features. But he could distinguish none, the head being poked forward, so that only its large crown became satirically visible; Neddy had in his right hand as nice a snow-ball as even he had ever manufactured. With both hands he now gave it two or three additional squeezes, until it grew almost as hard as a stone; the next instant bang it went, like a bursting bomb-shell, against the crown of the mysterious and detested head, causing, it may be presumed, an explosion like thunder in the ears and in the interior of its object, at all events making that object disappear, as if it and its owner had been sent staggering backwards into Mrs. Flaherty's, or Miss Flaherty's tenement; for the question of title was, in the present case, rather a debated one.

Many seconds did not elapse before Neddy had the door of his own temporary residence seen from the inside; and, while his handladies and their pig still slept on and snorted together, was peeping into his neighbor's apartment, over the division wall, just as Robert Costigan, though from its other side, had peeped over it, the night before into the secrecy of the residence of Mesdames Carty and Mulrooney.

Here he at first saw nothing but smoke. Waiting some time, and peering more sharply, he at length imperfectly discerned Joan Flaherty—a half-blind, and a wholly deaf and stupid old crone—sitting on her heels at a hearth, upon which, using her own mouth as a bellows, she puffed and puffed with a view of

kindling some atrocious materials for a fire; while almost for every puff she coughed and coughed, as if earnestly trying to force up her worn-out lungs. But though the young caves-dropper could as yet see no living thing but Joan, he could hear the sounds of other human voices than hers. He could hear threats and imprecations uttered in a morose, masculine voice, and plaintive expostulations, or lamentations, in the tones, he believed, which had reached him the previous night; and the subdued cry of an infant, too, and the sturdier wail of another young voice—all mixed up with the coughing, and the wheezing, and the bellows-blowing of old Joan. The venomous smoke made Neddy's eye smart and run water; still he perseveringly lunged, insecurely supported, to the top of the mud wall. In about half an hour, the exhausted beldame had succeeded in kindling her fire, and having previously thrown open the door of her house to let out the pestilent fog it had engendered, Neddy could make further observations. Standing near to her, and towards the farther side of the fire, he saw a man of rather low stature, yet of herculean build, combing with his fingers, his long, dishevelled, grey hair: and from the care with which the operation was performed, it seemed evident that he considered it one of great importance. He was enveloped in a loose, blue frieze coat, reaching in tatters below his knees; the half of his legs, that could be seen from under it, were bare; and old brogues, too large for him, and partially stuffed with straw—was indicated by blades of that article starting up over their inner sides—adorned his immense ill-shaped feet. Again Neddy Fennell tried to make out the features of Robin Costigan, but the redoubtable robber stood with his side turned to Neddy; and this circumstance, aided by the thick veil of grey hair, and the high-standing collar of Robin's wrap-rascal, once more baffled his scrutiny.

Other objects drew Neddy's deep attention. While engaged in his toilet, as has been described, Robin Costigan severely studied the proceedings of three children, who had not yet quite arisen from the straw, in which during the night they had burrowed. One was a girl of about nine years, wearing only the scantiest and most shabby drapery, secured by any possible contrivance, around her elegantly formed little person. The second was a boy, an incipient giant—say of five years. His upper dress consisted of an old waistcoat, his bare arms thrust through its arm-holes; while a threadbare piece of sacking, tied round his waist, descended almost to his feet. And the third child was no more than an infant, rolled up in a most curious bundle of rags; its sex is not yet known; but the strong presumption is, that it was a little female human creature.

The girl was busily employed scrubbing at the infant's face, with a coarse damp cloth. The boy was sitting in his straw, his chin resting on his little fists, and they in turn resting on his crippled-up knees—it was perfectly evident, that he contemplated, in mortal terror and deep dislike, the process he beheld going on, inasmuch as he expected to be himself very soon subjected to a similar one.

The infant gave a restive squall, and had it been any other infant, would certainly have fought, with full lungs, kicks, and writhings, against the uncongential friction inflicted upon its face in such very, very, cold weather. But a bellow from the man of the tattered "riding-coat," at once terrified the little animal into seeming acquiescence; it became silent and still, tears only running down its miserable face, as it fixed its frightened eyes on the bellower.

"Sorrah in your wizen, ye sheeg," apostrophized the superintendent of the scrubbing; "there's no squall from you when it's wantin'; but I'll learn you to bawl out in the right time, and to hould your whist in the right time—burroo!"—another bellow—"hould it up to me here," addressing the scrubber, who with visible trepidation obeyed. The man critically inspected the face, neck, hands, and arms of the unfortunate baby, twisting it and its little limbs here and there, with about as much compassion as if he were scrutinizing the points of a turkey offered to him for sale. He continued, speaking to the little girl—

"Well for you, you jade, that there's not a speck, the size of a pin's head, or I'd make you rue the day; fall to the legs and feet now, an' make 'em as clean as a whistle," and he went on combing his hair with his fingers.

"Hould it up agin," he commanded, after a short pause. "Do you call them washed, you faggot?" and he accompanied his words with a blow from his open hand that sent the girl and the infant rolling in the straw. She could not keep in a scream. "Not a tunc from you now, or I'll give you last night over agin;" he snatched up a cudgel near at hand.

"I won't cry, nor I won't say one word—I won't, I won't, sir dear," said the little scrubber, clasping her charge with one of her bare arms, rising to her knees, and joining both her hands.

"It will keep for another time, then," and the cudgel was put aside; "but go on with your work, I tell you, and don't bring my hand on you."

Her eyes gushing, but every whisper kept in,

she proceeded still further to torture the infant, by rubbing with the coarse, wet cloth at its legs and feet, as if she were bound to rub them quite away. Her overseer inspected her work again, and grumbled something like a half approval. He then examined the cap which was to cover the little being's head for the day, and which the girl ought to have perfectly washed over night. It was found not to be at all satisfactory, and a second swinging blow from his open hand followed.

The fire-woman, before she could recover herself, was next ordered to attack with her cloth the shivering and detesting young rascal, who, it has been said, awaited his turn in no amiable feelings. Very well did he know that he must not utter a sound of disapproval in the presence of the grey-headed supervisor; but to make amends for his silence he bit, whenever he thought that he was unobserved by his tyrant, the hands and arms of his attendant, until he almost fetched blood from them; while she, poor young creature, durst not utter a sound of complaint.

Her own person was next to be looked after; her pretty little face, her neck, arms, and hands, and her lower limbs and extremities to be carefully washed; and her abundant golden hair to be combed and adjusted in its natural curls adown her cheeks and shoulders with the best possible effect. And until this new task was completed to the full approval of her master, she was scrutinized and found fault with, as in the case of the infant and boy, and heavy punishment was still inflicted.

She now produced a small bag containing about one dozen of potatoes, and these she was commanded to wash, and place on the fire to boil; after which the man gave peremptory orders that the "breakfast" should be finished, and the three children ready to set out with him into the streets "in the turn of a hand," and then he left the hovel. A short time afterwards he might be found in a mean public house, sitting to a good fire, with his own breakfast placed before him, consisting of a loaf of bread, a cut of butter, a dish of "rashers and eggs," and a quarter of mulled porter, with a "stick in it"—that is to say, about two glasses of whiskey. As he opened the door to go out, Neddy Fennell abandoned his post of observation, with the view of at last fully confronting him abroad, and reading attentively the mysterious features of the half-hanged scoundrel; but a call from his mother's couch was not to be neglected.

He found the poor woman and her aunt much refreshed after a good night's sleep. Milk had been sent that morning by Father Connell for their and his use; this he heated, and Neddy's patients soon ate a hearty breakfast. He then prepared some for himself and put it into a noggin lent to him by his handladies; also furnished himself with his share of bread—and he noticed, not more than his share—took a few bites and sips, and passed, with the bread in one hand and the noggin in the other, into the neighboring wigwam.

The small pot containing the dozen potatoes was now boiled in this plentiful house and taken off the fire; and to one side of it sat the cook who had prepared them, the baby on her knees; to the other, the gruff little boy who had so well bitten her knelt to his occupation, as if he felt more devotion towards it than could be expressed by a sitting posture; for the trio were engaged, each more or less, in consuming the contents of the pot.

To make amends for the late coercion imposed on its natural propensity to cry out as shrilly as it could, the nondescript infant now screamed at the pitch of three Scotch bagpipes; while its nurse endeavored literally to stop its mouth with the largest potatoes she could find, herself being only able from time to time to swallow a scanty mouthful. No so the wicked-faced young cannibal opposite to her. Resolved, he seemed, as in truth resolved he was, to take ample advantage of her inability to satisfy her appetite. He peeled off the skins of the potatoes, and then dropped them, as it were, into his stomach with astounding despatch; yet it was not an expression of relish of his fare that appeared in his face; it was the jealous fierceness of craving hunger; and his scowl at the girl was actually ferocious whenever she abstracted a potato from the limited store, which he could have well appropriated entirely to himself.

Neddy Fennell stood over this group without being noticed by any one of it. Laying his bread across his noggin, and the hand that had lately held it upon the glossy golden hair of the little maid-of-all-work—

"My poor little girl," he said, "will you take a little bit of bread, and a little hot milk from me?"

She started and raised her eyes; now that it could be viewed clearly her face looked prettier than before; but she only stared at Neddy without uttering a word.

"Try it, poor little girl," he went on, seating himself on the floor by her side, "taste it—do now; 'tis very nice, and 'tis my own." He did not know how to account for her look of speechless astonishment; but it was the very first time during that little creature's whole life, that a human voice had so sounded in her

ears, or a human hand had been so stretched forth to offer her unbegged food. He broke a morsel of bread and put it into her hand; she mechanically conveyed it to her lips, and then ate it ravenously. Neddy held up his noggin to her, and inclining it sideways for her accommodation, she drank a little of the hot milk. Tears then ran from her eyes, while in the cant of the profession in which she had been tutored, she whined out:—

"May God reward the hand of help, and the tender heart of charity."

"Give me some of that," growled the little savage at the other side of the pot.

"You?" answered Neddy—"I won't give you a mouthful."

"I'll tell the ould fellow, if ye don't," retorted the apt scholar of a worthy teacher.

"Here, then, here," said the governess, quickly handing over to him almost the whole of the pieces of bread her young visitor had given her, in the teeth of Neddy's remonstrances to prevent her doing so. They disappeared as quickly as does a fish into water.

"And the good milk!" he continued hoarsely, for some of the unaccustomed food had stuck in his throat.

She ran over to him, the infant clucked up on one arm, with the noggin, which Neddy had now left, according to her entreaties, at her disposal.

The bundled-up infant, seeing that all was holiday around it, held out its arms, opened its mouth to an unusual span, and also tyrannically insisted on its share. Its poor little attendant could not, or at least did not reject its appeal, so that in a few moments, neither Neddy nor his new acquaintance had another mouthful of the bread and milk to divide between themselves.

But in a very short time, notwithstanding this privation, they were making each other's acquaintance rapidly. At Neddy's repeated solicitations, the little girl went into a history of all her sorrows, speaking in whispers, lest the prematurely desperate character, who had so often fastened his tasks in her flesh, might overhear the discourse. Neddy listened, sometimes in pity, sometimes in wrath; and with his whole heart and soul his eyes were fastened unwinkingly upon her face, and one of his hands were again laid unconsciously on her shining, golden hair; suddenly he felt her start and shudder, while her looks fixed upon some object, in a very agony of terror. The next instant, Neddy Fennell and Robin Costigan were staring directly at each other.

The beggarman's lip and chin had not been shaved for some time, so that the growth of his beard disguised the form of his mouth. His nose, too, was but half distinguishable through the streaks of grey hair, which he had combed with his fingers nearly over its whole length, and so far, all appeared sufficiently lachrymose and pity-stirring in his physiognomy. But even through the shade of that hair, two eyes darted their rays upon Neddy Fennell, under the bad and deep expression of which the intrepid boy quailed for a moment, but it was only for a moment; and then his steady though inquisitive glance, fully met the baleful glare of the other.

"Who are you, my chap?" demanded the beggarman.

"I'm myself, and who are you?" smartly asked Neddy in his turn.

"You live in the next house?"

"To be sure I do—well?"

The man did not immediately continue speaking. He took up the infant, and folded it very deliberately into the bosom of his loose blue riding-coat.

"Are ye coming?" he roared to the girl, and the wicked little boy. They took their places at his either side. He seized the younger with one hand; crippled up the fingers of the other towards his mouth, and then issued with his "helpless orphans," from the miserable hut.

Outside its threshold he found Neddy Fennell, still closely studying himself and his actions; and—

"Take care of yourself, my bouchal, and keep out of my way," he growled.

"Let you take care of yourself, and keep out of my way," retorted Master Neddy.

And, at a little distance, the boy followed him and his poor companions through the puzzle of the shower of houses, and then, through a scarcely less dirty suburb, into the town, pondering much as he trudged through the snow and the biting blast. He had at length scrutinized, as far as was possible, the features of the object of his great wonder and detestation. And they did not much disappoint his notions beforehand, of what those of the hero of Nelly Carty's tale ought to have worn. They were such features, too, as well became the brutal fellow, whom he had seen tormenting and beating the children a few hours ago.—But why he should have so tormented and beaten them, merely to have their hands and faces, and little limbs, scrubbed perfectly to his satisfaction, seemed a difficult question to solve. The beggarman began, in the first considerable street of the town, an oratorical appeal to the public, in which those very little creatures were noticed in the most affectionate

and touching terms; and Neddy's difficulties increased; he could see no identity between the robber, who had been nearly twice walked to the gallows' foot, and who, so very lately, had given proofs of the unaltered scoundrelism of his nature, and the poor mendicant now before him, whom every one pitied and relieved, on account of his love and care of his little orphans. But ere the appeal had been quite gone through he began to understand the matter. The wretched man, who could not afford for himself or for them, anything like covering sufficient in the present perishing weather, still, it was evident to any observer, tried to perform, towards the innocents, some of the duties of a parent, and upon this conviction public sympathy could not fail to be aroused.

"Avoch, see," cried the women as he passed along, "he's hardly able to keep a stitch on himself or them; and yet, see how clane and decent he has 'em, the cratures."

His appeal must be transcribed. It was made up of short sentences, and published in a loud sonorous voice, which rose and fell, in oratorical cadence, with, it may be said, each separate verse. As he went on with it, his head turned from side to side; his crippled hand and arm (the same which had clutched and wielded the cudgel the night before) imperfectly gesticulated, in a very awful manner; and all his features, even his eyes, so far as they could be read, through the veil of hair, expressed deep woe, and the veins of his neck swelled with the strength of his feelings.—Here then follow the exact words of his petition, neither added to nor diminished:—

"I was left with a motherless charge.

"God help the motherless!

"I was left with a child six days ould.

"I am a desolate man, the Lord pity me!

"It isn't by the words of the mouth, I tell ye—look into my breast, an' look at aich side o' me!

"I was left, for a space of nine weeks, sick, an' sore, an' lone, in a small wilderness of a cottage.

"The mother of the childther was taken away a corpse from my side.

"God in Heaven be merciful to the poor creature!

"I had no friend in the world, to succor myself or the childther.

"The Lord look down on the desolate!

"An' I come to sprike out my hard case, to the feelin' hearts of the Christian people.

"Good Christians, pity me!

"Pity the motherless charge! Pity the forlorn father! Ah, do, worthy tintler-hearted servants of God!"

Not many hours after hearing this piece of pathetic eloquence, Neddy Fennell was again prying into the secrets of Joan Flaherty's house. As nearly as possible the scene of the morning became repeated under his eyes.—Some questions arose concerning a morsel of bread which the little girl had received, during the day, as an alms. Indeed, while furnishing with hunger during their miserable perambulations, she had stealthily eaten it, and so at present it was not to be found in her little wallet. The protector of the motherless charge seized, with his crippled hand, now again made quite straight, his dreaded cudgel, and began to belabor the poor child most heartily. But while so employed, a good lump of hardened clay, suddenly smiting him on the side of the head, sent Robert Costigan staggering about the hovel; and ere he could recover from his astonishment and confusion, another missile of the same material, but of greater size and weight, followed its predecessor, and actually brought him down. With one dash of his hands, the beggarman drew back to either side of his forehead and face, their curtain of matted grey locks, the better to enable him to discern his assailant; and while in the act of doing so, and while he yet lay prostrate, Neddy Fennell at length beheld, distorted by rage and ferocity a face which, to his dying day, he never forgot.

Their regards met. Neddy was now astride on the wall, kicking it with his heels as it were a restive horse, which he spurred against a detested enemy; and his right arm was raised high, ready to discharge a third shot, and his very handsome boyish face glowed, and his brows frowned deeply over his flashing eyes, as he shouted out, "Yes, Costigan, I'm the very boy that did it! and if you beat that little girl again, I'll pelt the brains out of your robber's skull—take this over again for a warning."

The third bullet flew from his hands, but this time missed its billet. The next instant the beggarman was on his feet; and before Neddy could re-arm himself, a swinging blow from the cudgel staggered him in his seat on the top of the old clay wall, which had supplied him with ammunition; while a tug at one of his legs, made almost simultaneously with the blow, fairly dropped him under her own roof, into Nelly Carty's arms, who had just returned from her day's quest.

"You misfortunate bit iv a boy," whispered Nelly, in great wrath and alarm, "d'ye want to get yourself an' all iv us murdered?" She glanced towards the door, which she had left open. The beggarman came into them through it, as Neddy roared out louder than