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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER I.

The parish priest of — parish, about thirty-five years ago, counted half-way between seventy and eighty; yet he was a hale, sturdy man without any droop in his figure, or any indication of old age about him—this appearance resulting from an excellent natural constitution, habits of great temperance and regularity, and an abundance of healthful exercise, on foot and on horseback—indeed, in every possible way.

He used to walk along, with his chest expanded, his shoulders thrown back, his head quite erect, his arms hanging straight by his sides, and his fingers closed on the palms of his hands, and almost always working against them. His face showed scarce a wrinkle, and it was florid—not red and white, however, like some old people's faces, nor yet purple, like those of others, as if the smaller blood-vessels had burst, and congealed, within the surface of their skins—but it was overspread with a still rosy color of health. His forehead was expansive, and, at the temples, square; his eyes were blue, and generally expressing thought and abstraction—in which state, they used to stare straight-forward, almost without ever blinking—yet they often relaxed into a smiling, or, as it might be, moistened expression; during which change they appeared half-closed, and opened and shut very fast indeed. His scarcely grizzled eyebrows were bushy and protruding; his nose was long, large, but well-formed, and with a broad back. His lips were full, and for his age, remarkably red and handsome.

But above all, there was about his countenance the indications of a great singleness, and primitiveness, and beauty of character—so that if you met him, stepping measuredly, yet almost springingly along his suburb street, or the adjacent roads, and silently moving his lips, and working, as usual, the palms of his hands with his fingers, and taking no notice of you, though perhaps you might be an intimate friend, and his old eyes winking, and his whole face smiling to itself, you must inevitably have said, that the smile was not provoked by any object or circumstance then noticed by him, but rather that it came from a heart enjoying, at that moment, the sunshine of a virtuous, and therefore very happy intention; or—excuse poor, human vanity, even in its least offensive shape—recollection, perhaps.

Since the day he had become a clergyman, Father Connell had never altered the form or the texture of any article of his attire. He still wore the curious head-dress which his present biographers have already endeavored to describe—in their tale of John Doe in fact as worn by Father O'Clery—or indeed, if they had told the perfect truth, by the celebrated Irish friar, Father O'Leary. It consisted of an article made of goat's hair, or of horse hair, protruding from above the ears down to the neck, into a curled yet formal mass, daily dressed with powder and pomatum—and above this rampart arose a round, almost conical continuation of the wig, very smoothly slicked down, and slightly, but sharply peaked in the middle of the forehead. When a hat was placed upon the structure, it rested on the frizzled bulwark, of course, and therefore never descended lower than about the middle of the back of the head. And the hat which Father Connell, at least, wore with his grotesque head-clothing, was a good match for it—being very low-crowned, and exceeding broad-rimmed.

Our priest's black coat sloped to the skirts, and those skirts were enormously ample, and had great pocket-flaps across them, molar buttons, also on a gigantic scale, ornamenting both. His waistcoat was collarless, and fell, again, with huge pocket-flaps, nearly to his mid thigh. His black small-clothes were tightened at his knees by large silver buckles; and blue worsted stockings covered his legs; and his sharp pointed shoes also exhibited, across the insteps, silver buckles of great dimensions. Snow could not be whiter than his muslin stock, nor than the indication of his inner garment, every day in the year; and in winter an outside coat of dark blue, or, as it was then called a "jock," with a little round cape, hanging scarcely half way down his back, while its skirts did not come lower than his knees, formed his protection against inclement weather.

And thus attired, Father Connell, while walking along the streets of the adjacent town, necessarily displayed, joined with his peculiarities of mien, face, and bearing, before noticed, an air of eccentricity which passers-by, if very well, or at all acquainted with him, would stop to criticise; while he himself, good man, remained perfectly unaware that anything about him or in him deserved particular notice.

CHAPTER II.

It was Twelfth Night. Six o'clock, the hour for vespers in Father Connell's little parish chapel, jingled from a little cracked bell, set up at the top of a ruined, square Norman castle, some distance from the half-tolerated place of worship; for at that time there existed a

law that no Catholic house of prayer should summon its congregation from its own walls by means of a bell; and, in removing the illegal monitor from immediate contact with his chapel, the priest hoped to elude the pains and penalties awarded by this large-minded piece of legislation, for any breach of its mandate.

So, the little old cracked bell was wringing; the candles in the two badly gilded, wooden branches, which hung from the ceiling of the chapel, had been lighted; and six others, supported by tall candlesticks, also wooden, and badly gilded, on the altar, were in process of illumination, by the agency of a very handsome little boy, with auburn hair, which curled and glittered over his white surplice, as far as his shoulders; and the people summoned to evening devotion, were coming in; or, after bending before the sacrament, enclosed in the altar tabernacle, were decently taking their places throughout the poor building.

In the centre of the chapel certain moveable seats, technically called the choir, were arranged. When put together they formed three sides of a long parallelogram, running from the semi-circular railing around the altar (which enclosed a space called the sanctuary) to nearly the other end of the edifice. The top of this choir consisted of three old worm-eaten chairs, with high triangular backs, of which the middle one aspired to the dignity of an arm-chair, and further in assumption of its dignities, it stood upon a kind of little dais, one or two steps above the clay and mortar floor. At right angles with these old seats, and almost touching them at either hand, were two long benches with railed backs; while plain forms continued the side lines of the parallelogram, down to, as has been said, the railings before the altar.

It need not be said that the old arm-chair, of little case, was occupied by Father Connell, during vespers; while its two humble attendants were filled by his two curates. The confronting benches, proceeding from them towards the altar, afforded places to very religious men, wearing long linen garments, and after them, two little boys, wearing nice muslin surplices—the most eminent for good conduct, in every way to be found in the parish, as well as being the most distinguished for attention to certain small official duties of the chapel—*cajus de prete*, in fact. And upon the forms continuing the lines of the benches, sat a second class of pious men and boys, not indeed robed in white, but still honored with the distinction of immediately assisting in the chant of the vespers—although, he it noticed, every man, woman, and child of the congregation, might, if he or she liked, do the same thing.

While the places in the choir reserved for the unrobed men and boys were being taken possession of by them, the other pious men and boys, who wore the long linen dresses and muslin surplices, were assisting each other in the proper adjustment of their attire, in a little sacristy, at the back of the altar, and approachable from the chapel, first by a kind of gateway in the middle of its railed enclosure, and then by a door at one of the sides. Father Connell's curates already stood robed; and the old priest himself knelt in silent prayer, to a kind of desk, in a corner—no one around him speaking above his breath.

He arose, and proceeded to put on his ceremonial surplice. To aid him in this task, immediately bounded forward the very handsome, glossy-haired boy, who has been seen lighting the tall candles on the altar, and who, that business ended, had been waiting in the sacristy to enjoy the honor of discharging a conferred duty of a higher degree. In his buoyant eagerness to exhibit as an expert priest's valet, he happened to tread too familiarly upon one of Father Connell's feet; at which, smarting a good deal, and therefore a little ruffled at first, the clergyman suddenly turned round upon him; but so soon as his eye rested upon the half-penitent, half-laughing face of the bloomingurchin, he could not help—for the old man loved the boy—smiling in sympathy; and then he took him by the ear, in a make-believe show of punishing him, while thumb and finger pressed no harder than could a touch of velvet have done, and proceeded to address the offender.

"Neddy Fennell," it was in a whisper he spoke, and there was a curious contrast between his assumed tone of reproof, and the reflection in his eyes of the glances of his half-spoiled pet; "Neddy Fennell will you stop doing mischief? Neddy, while you are in the house of God, my child, you must behave quietly, and with decorum and gravity; in the fields, you may jump and play, Neddy Fennell, but in God's own house you must, I say, be orderly and well-behaved." And again he feigned to inflict punishment on the boy's ear, only playing in the mean time with the little silky-surfaced organ. The moment he let it go, Neddy Fennell, covering it with his own hand, assumed such a farical face of mock terror and suffering, and so well acted the part of pretending to wipe off his surplice imaginary drops of blood, which had trickled on it from the tyrannical pressure of the priest's finger and thumb, that his little companions, amongst whom he now resumed his place, grew red in the faces, with the efforts they made to suppress their laughter.

The priest having adjusted his surplice, at the vestment press, stood inactive for a moment as if in thought, and then turned round and spoke in a low voice to all those who stood by:

"The men and the boys of the choir are to wait here in the sacristy after vespers for me; I have something very particular to say to them."

No one distinctly replied, but there was a murmur of assent, with a bending of many heads, which gave a sufficiently satisfactory answer.

After pausing, in reverential recollection of what he had next to do, Father Connell gave a well-known signal, by waving to and fro the back of his hand—and there was dignity in the motion; and thereupon the men of the choir, in their white linen dresses, issued out of the sacristy into the chapel, two by two, holding their joined hands before them, and after them went the little boys wearing surplices, imitating their elders, as well as they could, in every respect. In passing through the railed-in space before the altar, all and each bent their knees and bowed, as the general congregation had done on entering the chapel, to the veiled sacrament; and then proceeded to assume the places we have before mentioned as allotted to them. Finally, Father Connell and his curates quitted the sacristy, and in passing, he knelt praying on the steps of the altar; after which taking his throne, his two reverend assistants at his either side, vespers began by his giving out, after some prefatory form, and in a fine old voice, the magnificent psalm of *"Dirig Domine."* He was answered by the whole strength of the congregation, young and old, in the result of whose efforts, although perfect accordance or harmony did not indeed occur, there was much of impressive devotion, which ought to have given satisfaction to any good heart; and thus continued the vespers, through a succession of many of the most beautiful of the psalms, the pastor always beginning each psalm. But we had almost forgotten to notice that the individuals particularly entitled to take up the responses, were a row of pious women, wearing ample white dresses, with hoods that came over their heads, and almost over their faces, who occupied a form within the railing before the altar, as well as by young girls in the galleries, indifferently well instructed in their occasional services by the old, perpetual clerk of the chapel—himself, by the way, not a very eminent musician.

Vespers ended. All the lay persons previously occupying the "choir," returned from the chapel into the sacristy, and employed themselves in taking off and folding up their chapel attire; and then all awaited the re-entrance of their parish priest, as he had desired them to do. Were there none among them who well understood what his formal intimation before vespers meant? Ay, indeed, a good many, boys as well as men; and they could scarcely now suppress, although, under the influence of a decorous feeling, they had lately done so, indications of their knowledge of Father Connell's intentions towards them, for the evening. It was Twelfth Night, in fact, and the majority of them knew his practices well.

He came back to them; he gravely unrobed himself, not confronting them; he bent his head over his clasped hands; and then he turned round, and his face shining with the delight which he knew he was about to impart to his auditors, said:—

"My good friends and little children, this is the season for offering with pure and light hearts, to a good and great God, praises both in solemn hymns and in cheerful acts, for the wonderful and merciful bounty of his coming to redeem and save us, and my friends and you, my little children, we have returned here after singing praises and thanksgivings to the Lord of heaven and of earth; and He in his love will not be displeased if we now enjoy ourselves in making use—temperately, however, and very temperately—of some of the good things which he has placed at our disposal—yes, my friends, big and little, we will now make merry amongst ourselves; so come after me, my good friends and little children; it is Twelfth Night, and we ought to rejoice, and we will rejoice; come—I have prepared a little treat for you—come after me, and let us rejoice."

Father Connell and his invited guests had not far to go to their house of entertainment, for it was not more than a hundred paces from the chapel. He stopped at the head of his troop—theurchins partly composing it shouting shrilly though in a low key, and the pious men chuckling at their antics—he stopped, we say, before the humble entrance door to his thatched dwelling, and after laughing heartily himself, knocked loudly. His old housekeeper, whose business it had been to prepare for the soiree, and who therefore expected the throng of revellers, quickly opened the portal to his summons, and, as amiably as her curious nature and habits would permit, bid everybody welcome.

Mrs. Mulloy was a peculiarity in her way;—tall, coarsely featured, peck-marked, and with an authoritative something like a beard, curling on her double chin; and almost fat in person and in limbs. Her bearing was lofty; her look arbitrary if not severe, and in every re-

spect she seemed fully sensible of the importance of her station as housekeeper to her parish priest;—though it was whispered that even upon him, the source from which she derived all her consequence, Mrs. Mulloy did not always hesitate to forbear from dictatorial remonstrances, whenever in the exercise of his charitable extravagance, she was pleased to detect a wasteful system of dissipation. Let it be added that her voice was the contrary of what Shakspeare calls:—

"An excellent thing in woman;"

and that her master was a little afraid of its not un-frequent eloquent exercise.

Yet on the present occasion, allowing as a great rarity, her usual inhospitality to unbend a little, Mrs. Mulloy, inspired by the pervading spirit of the hilarity of the season, did as we have hinted, behave very graciously in her capacity as potress.

"Welcome then," she huskily said; "welcome all, and *ceud aille a jille*, to the Twelfth-Night's faste; come in, your reverence; come in, men and boys, every mother's son o' ye."

"Come in, my children," echoed the old priest, gleefully, "come in, in the name of God;" and he bustlingly led the way into his white-washed, earthen-floored, and only sitting-room; in the black marble chimney-piece of which was, however, rudely carved a mitre, indicating that the paltry apartment had once, and very recently, been inhabited by a Roman Catholic bishop; but such was the fact; and such were the times. Father Connell was himself Catholic dean of his diocese.

Seats of every description had been arranged all round the parlor; in its centre stood a large square table, at the four corners of which was a mighty jug filled with ale, whose froth puffed over and down the sides of each vessel. Rows of delf mugs were placed at the edges of the table; but the crowning feature of the Twelfth Night's feast was a great two-handled osier basket, filled and pyramidally heaped up with brown-skinned, shining cakes of a fragrance so delicious as to perfume the apartment, and penetrating so keenly the nasal nerves of at least the younger portion of the guests, as to give them fair promise of the capability of the contents of that basket to gratify equally and even more satisfactorily another of the senses. We could dilate at great length on the marvellous and long inherited excellence of these cakes.—In our childhood they were termed, after the name of their then manufacturer, "Biddy Doyle's cakes;" in generations farther back they had borne, out of reverence to their great inventor, the appellation of "Juggy Fowler's cakes;" and Juggy Fowler had sold or bequeathed to Biddy Doyle the secret of making them; but Biddy Doyle died suddenly and intestate, so that the grand secret died with her; and alas, from that day to this, no succeeding *artiste* has possessed genius enough, truly to imitate, in the estimation of the experienced, Juggy Fowler's far-famed and unique condiment.

We have enumerated all the dainties provided by Father Connell for his Twelfth Night's soiree, nor did he in his heart deem anything better or rarer could have been supplied on the occasion, in which opinion not one of his company differed from him; for indeed when they had taken their places, as exactly observed by them in the "Choir" at vespers, around the board, but at a distance from it, a set of happier faces could not on that same evening have been seen at any other board, no matter how costly, nor in any other mansion, no matter how magnificently contrasted with the poor priest's parlor. Our host hurried about, as if his very heart and soul were in the scene—though why our mysterious "as if?" There is no doubt at all upon the subject; his heart and soul were in it. With one or two favorites assisting him, he walked round and round the circle until each individual of it held a "Biddy Doyle" in one hand and a merry mug of ale in the other; and he patted the children on the head; or rallied the men on their peculiarities; or joined in their homely jests upon each other; loud and general arose the frequent laugh, in which none joined more gleefully than he did; and almost as frequent as his laughter, and fully as loud, were his calls upon "Peggy," to replenish from the half barrel under the stairs, the gigantic jugs which stood at the four corners of the square old oak table in the middle of the banquet hall.

Be it understood that all the members, men and boys, of our old friends' choir were unpaid volunteers; and moreover, of a very humble class in society—in fact, working masons, or slaters, or carpenters, and so forth, or else very inferior shopkeepers, and with few exceptions, the sons of all such. And yet with these men and boys our good priest laughed, jested, and made merry; and anon, story-telling, himself setting the example, became the order of the evening. And a few of these we shall here glance at, while others of them, reported more at length, will be found in another place.

Jack Moore, then, a very tall, uncouthly shaped mason, recounted how all the neighborhood in which he dwelt, had, a few evenings before, been "frightened to death" by the sud-

den coming to life, after her death, of "ould Alice Mahony."

The body of "ould Alice" had, as Jack stated, been "laid out" to be waked, on the door of the room in which she died—taken off its hinges for the purpose, a common expedient in such emergencies, and on it her lifeless body lay stretched, with a handsome shroud on—There was plenty of stuff and tobacco for all the attendants at the wake, and plenty of gossip going on. The town clock—(yes, Mrs. Radcliffe!)—solemnly—told—twelve—when up sprang old Alice on her temporary couch, and without quite opening her eyes, sat on her heels, and almost thrusting her knees against her teeth, as she had been much used to do before she died. Upon this, out ran, except two or three, the throng who had previously been waking her, tumbling helter-skelter over each other, and those who were last in the race wildly screaming in terror, and swearing that she was bounding after them bird-like, though with some little assistance from her shrivelled arms. And here ended Jack Moore's story; Jack, a man of reserved and not very exploring habits of mind, solemnly and contentedly dropping it at this point of interest.

Tim Brennan, "the stone cutter," supplied, however, a commentary on the wonderful tale— he having been one of the very few self-collected persons who had remained behind in the wake-room after Alice had sat up on the door; and he explained that the solitary and neglected creature had died suddenly, quite alone, with her nether limbs crippled up; had been so found by some chance visitors the next morning, cold and stiff; that, in order to straighten her "dacently," and make her "a handsome corpse," her now attentive old female neighbors had hit on the expedient of strapping across her knees, and of nailing down, at either side of her bier, something not sufficiently strong for their purpose; that in process of time this badly constructed piece of machinery gave way; that consequently, the death-rigid limbs suddenly resumed the position in which He, the Master, had confirmed them; and that was all, so that Alice had not indeed come to life; and her body, instead of voluntarily jumping off the door, had only rolled off it; and she had all along been stone dead, and was now decently buried to the heart's content of any one who might choose to satisfy himself on the subject. But Jack Moore gave no credit to this account of the matter; for his own eyes had been witnesses of the real event; he was one of the very first to run out after plainly seeing old Alice borne upon her heels to the floor; and as undeniable proof of his assertions, he exhibited a contusion on his lip, which he had received by knocking it against the top of the head of a much shorter man than himself, while that person impeded his way, during their joint escape from the old woman's leap-jack kind of pursuit after them. In the dubious state of mind in which these two readings of the matter left the audience, there was now no laughter, nor even smile; their entertainer being the only person amongst them who continued to chuckle heartily.

Jeff Corrigan's story came next. He recounted the marvellous finding, very nearly one morning, of the well-known night-cap of James Dullard, the weaver, on the only remaining pinnacle of the old castle near at hand, and before noticed as affording a legal place for the little cracked bell, used in summoning Father Connell's congregation to prayers.

Old Jim Dullard had, upon a certain night, fallen asleep at his loom; and while he dozed, he seemed to dream that somehow he was in the ruined building; that he had ascended the spiral stairs; clambered, at the devil's suggestion, he supposed, and with evident peril to life and limb, to an old man of seventy, up to the very highest attainable point of the edifice; and had there ventured to look down, and become inexpressibly terrified at his height from the surface of the earth. While just awakening from his trance, his wife came in to summon him to a late supper; missed off his head its usual covering; hinted the fact to him; and then, after passing his hand over his bald head, his pallid face turned into a dingy white color, even more remarkable than was its wont; his long jaws dropped, and became still more elongated; and in utter consternation he now additionally recollected, and admitted to his spouse, that after having been so very much frightened in his dream, while looking downward from the top of the "ould castle," he fancied he had hung upon its point nearest to the sky, the article in question. She laughed and called him to her assistance, peered everywhere through the little manufactory in which was her husband's loom; but no night-cap could be found; and horrible to add, very early the next morning, James Dullard, issuing forth with a next-door neighbor, whom he had called up to afford him sympathy, and add to his courage in his projected investigation, discovered the missing head-gear—while, however, only looking up to the old castle, from their little street of cabins—perched on the exact place where James had but dreamt having put it; and he ought to know it well, although now seen at such a distance; for he had worn it day after day as night for the last ten or twelve years.