

# The True Witness,

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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER VII.

In quitting the abode, holding fast by Neddy Fennell's hand, Father Connell had no eyes for anything around him. He did not therefore perceive, that the woman he had first seen cooking her griddle-cake, was now sitting on her heels at the fire, along with another woman, habited very like herself; the friendly visitor, in fact, for whom she had mistaken Father Connell on his coming in; and who, during his conference with Mrs. Fennell, had really returned to her co-partner in a certain traffic, her body bent under a little sack, secured thereon by a hay-rope passing across her forehead.

Upon the meeting of the two friends, a subdued "whist!"—and nodding and winking towards the inner room, on the part of the cook, and then, whispering explanations at the fire, enabled them to sit quietly until the priest passed out—not, however, without disagreeable apprehensions of what might be his notice of them before he left their house. But he did leave it, paying no attention to them; and then, after a cautious pause to give him time to get far-enough away, they ventured to indulge in a few sneers and jests at his expense; turning by-and-by to other topics.

The two persons before us, were what is locally called "potato-beggars;" it should be added, potato-sellers too, as they certainly vended to good advantage the food received, as alms. Amongst the farmer's wives, whom, in pursuit of their calling, they very often visited, one of them was in the habit of admitting that she "went by the name" of Nelly Carty, and the other by that of Bridget Mulrooney; and both used to tell pathetic stories of their large families of orphans, and how they were left alone in the wide world, without a "munkind to do a hand's turn for them on the flure," or to earn as much as a cold potato for themselves and their starving children. Co-partners in trade, it has been said they were; joint owners of their crumbling hut they also were, and every article of its furniture had two mistresses; and in all the hardships of business, as well as in all its profits, they had share and share alike.

Perhaps the majority of the colonists of the shower of houses, living upon chance as we have intimated, were made up of potato-beggars; as well, indeed, as were a good portion of the occupants of all the miserable suburbs at that time surrounding our city; yet, none of them seemed dissatisfied with their social position; and, in fact, compared with the less brazen-faced paupers around them, who were ashamed to beg, little reason had these sturdy vagabonds to be so. If famine did not reign over the land, in consequence of the destruction, by an unfavorable season of the potato-root, "there was little fear o' them," as they said themselves; and a passing notice of the manner in which Nelly Carty, and Bridget Mulrooney drove their thriving trade, may prove the assertion, as regards the whole of their numerous and respectable body.

At break of day in winter, and at six o'clock during every other portion of the year, out sallied either one or the other of them; her well-patched bag of indefinite material chucked under her arm, leaving her helpmate at home, to take care of the house, and perform other necessary duties of the firm. And suppose Nelly Carty went out, Bridget Mulrooney had, compared with Nelly's responsibilities, a day of exquisite rest; and hence, by the way, arose the extensive association of potato-beggars following their vocation, in couples at least, if not in trios, or quartettes. So, Nelly went out, and after clearing the town and its environs, traversed a pretty wide district, in mud and in mire, in sunshine and in all its contraries, hail, rain, snow, frost, fog, wind, and tempests, and so forth; along high-roads and by-roads, along *boheens* and field-paths; over hedge and ditch, over hill and valley, until at last she succeeded in amassing in her sack a creditable load, amounting to about one hundred weight, gained by most plausible beggary from all the well-known farm-houses in her chosen haunt; and also very often from the cabins of the working peasants encountered on her way.

But Nelly was not such a fool as to carry her bag from door to door with any appearance of plenty in it. So soon as it began to assume a plethoric shape, she knew well some convenient spot in the open fields in which to deposit its contents; after which, she could bear it quite empty and open-mouthed, and beseechingly to the thresholds next to be visited; and before evening fell, after receiving the "bit and sup," along with her usual donation of raw potatoes, at more than one of the truly charitable dwellings among which she quested, Nelly returned, with the certainty of a raven, to the hiding-hole glanced at; secured the mouth of her now well distended wallet; passed a rope of hemp, or of bay over its middle, when she had poised it between her shoulders; re-passed the rope across her forehead; then gained, by the shortest cut, a place of rendezvous on the high-road, where she met perhaps

a dozen of her sisterhood, though by no means in partnership with her, who there had sat down to rest a little while, after the happy termination of their day's ingenuity; rested, and smoked, and gossiped, merrily and loudly along with them; in their company walked home, bent double, though on sturdy bare red legs and feet; gained the rent free and tax-free dwelling of which she and Bridget Mulrooney were joint-proprietors; entered it, and found Bridget prepared to afford her in every way a luxurious welcoming, after her tramp of at least fifteen long Irish miles; relieved herself, with her helpmate's joyous aid, of her formidable fardel, and sat down at the brisk little fire to become very happy. And the next morning Bridget Mulrooney went out with the bag, of course, and Nelly staid at home to enjoy her day of repose; and so, day after day the year round, the business of their concern was regularly carried on.

The shower of houses has passed away; not a trace even of the foundations—if ever they had any—of its hundred-and-fifty wigwags can be seen; but potato-begging has thereby suffered nought, either in popular estimation or in the numbers of its professors. To this very hour, towards the close of the day, detachments of the amiable sisterhood, homeward bound, and generally proceeding in single file, while they all gabble and laugh, and gibe, and shout to each other, from front to rear, may be encountered upon every high-road diverging from their native town. There is one of those roads, by the way, along which the good ladies do not trudge in very high spirits, but rather with clouded brows, scowling eyes, and muttering voices, and that one is the road to the left-hand side, of which, just as it is about to join Gallows Green, a certain building now begins, with every promise of being soon finished, to erect its austere looking front—the district poorhouse, in fact.

But Bridget and Nelly are still before us, at their fire, provokingly inviting us to turn from a general notice of them to something more individual and domestic; and it was Bridget Mulrooney who had been out that day with the bag.

When they became quite assured that the priest was beyond hearing or observation, Nelly returned to her griddle-cake, which, during her retreat into the inner apartment, she had not forgotten to take care of, and now found it done "to a turn," and to her heart's full satisfaction, as it exhibited on both sides the proper speckled surface of brown and white, which demonstrated her culinary success. She removed it from the griddle, cut it up into measured portions and placed these on edge round the hob, to keep them still comfortably hot. She then put a short form in front of the smirking fire; and using a rickety old chair as a sideboard, deposited upon it her odd cups and saucers, as she called them—and indeed "odd!" they were in every sense of the word, of different sizes, patterns, and colors; by their sides, or among them, one leaden teaspoon, a little jug with a broken nose, three white delft plates with blue edges, a wooden "noggin," a little black tin tea-pot, and a wooden-lapped knife. This done, she drew out of her capacious pockets a small folded paper, holding one-quarter of an ounce of tea, and after it a second parcel somewhat larger, enveloping two ounces of intensely brown sugar. During her proceedings so far, a small three-legged metal pot had been boiling away gloriously, after the removal of the cake and the griddle, on the fire; with the aid of the wooden noggin she now abstracted from this pot, water to make her tea in the little dingy tea-pot; and, still continuing her allotted household duties, split the different portions of her cake with the wooden-hafted knife, and then heaped butter upon the insides of each portion, until the dainty was saturated through and through.

Pending these preparations, Bridget Mulrooney, squatted on the floor, at one end of the short form, looked on at Nelly's process, with very pleasing anticipations, and asking a careless question now and then, and uninterruptedly extending the palms of her red hands and the soles of her red feet so closely to the fire as, by nice and habitual calculation, barely to avoid the uncomfortable result of having them blistered, enjoyed, it may be boldly affirmed, a position and situation of great bliss. Her day of labor was over; she was deliciously resting herself; she had not to stir in the performance of any household duty; abundant and cheering refreshment was close at hand; and she was not to go on the tramp for one whole day again—what earthly lot could surpass hers? Ask a queen!

Everything being in readiness, Nelly Carty also squatted herself at the end of the form opposite to which Bridget Mulrooney sat. The pair rubbed their hands in gleisich anticipation; and the pig, nestled in his corner, thrust out his snout from his straw, regardless of his mistresses, and good-humoredly granted his satisfaction at seeing them so comfortable, and so near the point of perfect enjoyment.

Our hostess of the evening poured out the scalding hot tea, sweetening it well with the thoroughly brown sugar, and more than once sipping with the little leaden spoon from both

the cups before her, to ascertain, as in duty and etiquette bound, the quality of the beverage, according to the judgment of her own palate. And again the smiling Hebe of the feast stirred the compound mixture with her little leaden spoon, again took a sip out of each cup, wagged her head in approval of the final fitness of the beverage; and handing over one measure of it to her helpmate Bridget, cried out in a tone of utter joviality:—

"Here, my old duchess, will that lie in your way, we wondher?"

"That's nate tay, sure enough, Nelly," after swallowing a mouthful so hot and so pungent, that it obliged her to close her eyes during its descent through her throat; "but I think yourself is as much of an ould duchess as I am, Nelly."

"Faith we're a pair of ould duchesses, Bridget, and much good may it do us, I say."

"There's them is worse off, Nelly, wid our good tay and our butthered cake."

"Well, well, Bridget, a'nah machree, if you were lookin', at me to-day evenin' when the ould priest came in! By this same blessed tay, I thought the ground would open and swallow me. Sure I thought that 'twas your four bones that lifted the latch; and so what does I do, but sings out, 'devil welcome you, honey,' to the face iv his big wig."

"Oh-a! oh-a! and what did he say to you, Nelly?"

"He has no good will to me of ould—and he told me I'll die with that word in my mouth—but I won't—I'll die a good Christian yet, Bridget, as I told him."

"And we'll all do that, Nelly, and why not?"

"If there's anything comes across you, Bridget, the grass won't grow under my feet till I hunt out the priest for you, and bring him to the bedside to you—and by coorse you'll do the like for me, Bridget?"

"By coorse, Nelly, by coorse; but tell me what's the reason that Father Connell would have an ould grudge against you, Nelly?"

"Faix, and that you'll know afore long, my jewel, if Nelly Carty's tongue doesn't get the palsy in it."

"Och, there's little dread or that, Nelly."

"Sorra a fear, my ould duchess, but wait a bit, or you please. *Go skurru dhinch uua kerd* goes one way, but I say, no story widout the supper."

A second cup of tea, precisely manufactured as its predecessor had been, was served out, and Nelly continued:—

"I believe it's ten years agone sense you an' I kem together, Bridget. I lived on the Lake at that time, an' Father Connell has a mortil hatred to the Lake; and I was livin' under the war roof with Tim Donohar—you know Tim Donohar, Bridget?"

"No, I never stopped on the Lake, Nelly, and so I hadn't a knowledge of him."

"He goes by the name of Woodbine."

"Woodbine, enugh! And what do they call him by that name for, Nelly?"

"He has wan good leg, Bridget, but the other isn't the follow iv it; and he carries a crutch at the side where the odd leg hangs; and if you war to see that leg!—it twists round the crutch wan or two times, after the manner iv the woodbine that grows in the hedges, and for the same reason they calls him Woodbine."

"He, he, he! sorra a better."

"Well, my ould hare, I lived under the one roof wid Woodbine at the time I'm goin' to tell about; and Tim and the whole of us liked a bit of mate well enugh; so myself was out in the direction of Ballysalla, and there was as fine a dhrake as ever you could lay your two eyes on, and as nice a duck along with the dhrake becoorse, and the both were paddlin' on afore me; and shure it came into my head that they were tired, the creatures; they waddled over and hether at sich a rate; but since that time I was often thinkin' it was the fat that made them hobble in their gate o' goin'—what do you think, Bridget?"

"Och! and it was the fat, sure enugh—he! he! he!"

"Faix, and maybe you're in the right.—Well, howsomdever, havin' the notion that they were tired, sure I said to myself I'd carry 'em a start, and enugh to do I had to ketch 'em."

"Well, well; but sure that might put id in your head that they weren't tired, Nelly?"

"It never crossed my mind at that time, and more betoken there's no dependin' on a duck or dhrake. I often seen 'em under a horse's foot, an' you'd think the hoof was down on their backs; and after that, they'd twist out o' the way, like a cute ould cel, and there wouldn't be a feather touched."

"Well, after a rale chase, shure I had my duck and my dhrake safe enugh, and I puts one under one arm, and another under the other arm, an' draws the cloak over 'em, and I was goin' my way when the Widow Delouchry comes up to me, and she puts questions to me about the same duck and dhrake. Myself, said I, seen 'em crossin' the stubble-field a little while agone, but then up comes the Widow Delouchry's son to her help, and after him her daughter—and they were all lookin' across the stubbles, when, my jewel, the threacherous duck cries out, 'Walk, walk, walk,' under one arm, and her dhrake makes answer to

her under my other arm; and ochono, lanua machree, they tore open my mantle, widout sayin' by your leave, or how do you like it, and out they pulls mister drake and mistress duck forment the world; and I gets a slap on one cheek wid the dhrake, and a slap on th'other cheek wid the duck, and they falls pullin' me to babby-rags; but afore they had me tore asunder entirely, up gallops Father Connell on horseback, and he tried to make pace; and then, shure they told him the whole story, and iv a sartainty he looked very black at me, and shuck his wig frightful to see, and yet for all that, the ould creature of a priest wouldn't let 'em touch me any more, but told me to make the best o' my way into the town; and he overtuk me on the road, and he gave me the best of advice, and he made inquiries about my way of livin' and everything; and shure I told the poor man how the husband was dead, and how the childer war very badly off entirely; and I didn't say I stopped in the house wid Woodbine at all, only I gave him the name of another place—and what would you have of it, Bridget? when he came to help myself and the childer, he didn't find me where I said I had my lodgin'."

"Ho! ho! faix, and that was contrary enugh."

"Och, mostha, and the worst is to be told yet, Bridget Mulrooney. Woodbine, as I made known to you, liked a bit o' mate, and he was hard run for the same one time; and Father Connell had two goats to give him crame for his tay, the poor gentleman, and Woodbine comes across the goats; and as shure as you're planked there afore the fire, he brings the goats home wid him—so that becoorse we didn't want for roast and biled while they lasted. But murder an' ages! just as we were on the last of 'em and it was purty late in the night when we were sittin' at the fast, the latch o' the door was riz up, my jewel, and in walks Father Connell his own self! and shure the goatskins was hangin' agin the walls, and they could the pass on us. Oh! oh! oh! you wouldn't give threepence for our souls and bodies when we saw him standin' on the flure—we thought he'd ate us alive. But what do you think? The poor foolish man spoke to us peaceable enugh, considering we was after devourin' his purty goats; and afore goin' away, he told us the worst thing he'd wish us was that they might be cryin' 'mag-a-mat' in our stomachs; and now it's a down-right truth I'm going to tell you, Bridget, Woodbine and myself, and two more, used to hear the 'mag-a-mat' inside iv us every night for a long while after."

"Well, Bridget, asthore, if Woodbine and the rest of 'em was in trouble from the priest, sure it's myself was in the rale, downright scrape. I thought to hide my head, rememberin' about the dhrake and the duck; but he knew me at the first peep, my honey—and though you'd think from the way he goes, that he wouldn't be able to take notice of you at all, his ould blue eye darts through you as a needle for all that."

"That's the truth, Nelly: we all know he has the sharp eye in his head."

"And yet, Bridget, if he seen the man that I seen to-day—though he has good reason to know that man well—keen as his eyes are, he could never call to mind who he was looking at."

"Arrah, d'ye say so! and who was that man, Nelly?"

"I'll tell you then, Bridget, and you'll say it's a story worth harkenin' to. It's beyond thirty years ago, since what I'm goin' to rehearse for you happened. There was a clane young boy, at that time, livin' not far from this very place, and he went by the name of Robin Costigan; and I was a very young girl then, and I'll say no more about Robin and myself at present;—only somehow it happened that Robin borrowed the loan of a horse, without axin' lave, and he was coteh on the back of that horse at a fair, in the Queen's County; and—but murther! What's that at the door o' the house?"

Neither of the dames had heard Father Connell impart to Neddy Fennell his intention of soon coming back that very evening to their domicile. After his departure with the boy, they had sat down, without fear of interruption, for the night, to enjoy their "tay," and had therefore secured, on the inside, their crazy door as well as they could. Hence, upon now hearing a loud thumping and kicking at it, considerable was their surprise, if not alarm.—Up they bounced together, and together bawled out, through the chinks in the door, a questioning challenge to the unexpected visitors.

"Let me in, ye unfortunate creatures," answered the tones of Father Connell's well-known voice, not angrily however.

Suppressing their screams, shouts indeed, if they had let them escape, one of the ladies hastened to hide away, as quickly as possible, all evidences of merry-making; while the second, with frank and hearty avowals of answering the priest's request, seemingly fumbled with great zeal to try and open the door; and when at last she did pull it open, great was her astonishment to see Father Connell and little

Neddy pass in, each heavily laden with different kinds of burdens.

But, before continuing any longer this history, under the roof of Nelly Carty and Bridget Mulrooney, we suddenly perceive a necessity for premising why our parish priest took Neddy Fennell with him, upon a promise of soon returning to the lad's mother, and where they went together, and how they now reappeared burthened as has been noticed.

CHAPTER VIII.

Still piloted by his friend Neddy, Father Connell had treaded his way through the shower of houses. He and his faithful guide cleared them, and the old man walking at so brisk a pace as almost to make the boy trot in order to keep up with him, the confidential pair halted before the outer door leading into the yard of the clergyman's residence. It was partially open, and Father Connell thought he should know the meaning of that circumstance; he said nothing, however, but crossing the yard to a little stable just opposite to him, unhasped its door as quietly as possible, and stealing in with his companion, who, no ways dull for his age, watched the priest's proceedings with much wonder, and perhaps some humor, took Neddy by the shoulders, placed him out of sight from any one passing by, mounted with great agility a ladder in one corner, gaining by its agency a hay and straw loft, and after moment's delay handed down to his juvenile helper some four or five small bundles of fresh straw.

"And now don't stir out of that, for your life," he whispered, shaking his clenched hand at Neddy. "No, not a foot until I come back to you again, Neddy."

"Never fear, sir," answered the boy in a like cautious whisper, who, in turn, shook his little fist in good mimicry. "I'm not the lad to budge on you, sir," and his priest patted his head, and seemed very well pleased at having so excellent a colleague in his contemplated enterprise.

Then he hasped the stable-door upon Neddy; took out his latch-key and opened the door of his house; stood upon its threshold, and peered before him and to each side, with increased vigilance. There was no one as yet visible. He advanced a step or two, paused, again peered in every direction, and listened;—all was still, right, and safe. He trod on tiptoe into Mrs. Molloy's kitchen; it was seemingly quite untenanted. He took a candle off her kitchen table and dared to invade her bed-chamber. He stealthily stripped the blankets from her bed, and was about to steal a heavy patchwork quilt, but conscientiously hesitated for a moment; and deciding, after much deliberation, that the greater portion of it might have resulted from her own industry and contrivance, and not from his pocket, finally resisted the sore temptation. Yet, after that, he approached Mrs. Molloy's wardrobe—

an old trunk in which she kept all her most useful portions of dress—abstracted from its contents after much, and indeed not unpuzzled scrutiny, two nicely folded linen robes, of a certain description, rolled them up in her blankets, stealthily passed out again—his bundle under his arm—from her bed-room and through her kitchen, and as stealthily ascended a little, narrow, and very short staircase to his own sleeping apartment.

Here, the first theft he had to commit was easily got through; the blankets of his bed were soon coiled over the pack he had already accumulated. But he also wanted a few shillings, and now some delay occurred. He placed Mrs. Molloy's candle on a chair, sat down on another, and gazed wistfully and debating at an old-fashioned piece of oaken furniture, partly writing-desk and book-case, and partly chest of drawers. In one of its recesses was a little linen bag with a running-string, containing money begged exclusively for the support of his parish poor school; durst he fairly and honestly make use, for a time, of any portion of the contents of that little bag for any other purpose? He reasoned this case with his heart as well as with his mind; at last resolved that the call at hand was so urgent and peculiar that he indeed might do so—firmly promising to himself to replace with interest what he should now only borrow from the small hoard; and then he courageously appropriated the few shillings he had wanted and returned to the stable, there helping his youthful accomplice in this burglary on his own house to mount the straw on his shoulders, while he himself arranged to carry under one of his proper arms the goodly bundle plundered within doors.

In all his proceedings the good man was quite serious and earnest; while Master Neddy Fennell saw so much drollery in the whole affair that, in assisting with all possible gravity, as he was desired to do, in every necessary proceeding, a looker-on might have detected in his eye and manner signs of a waggish enjoyment, which, however, fully escaped Father Connell's notice.

But Father Connell had not been as successful as he imagined in avoiding observation.—To be sure, as he had sagely surmised, upon finding the door of his yard open, Mrs. Molloy was not at home—the lady having "slipped