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FATHER CONNELL: A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XV.

But, notwithstanding all his peculiarities, the master of the English Academy was really a good and efficient master; and perhaps throughout all Ireland, at the time, there was not a better school of the kind than his.

In it were taught, and well taught, along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, history, geography, English grammar, English composition, and the first principles of a certain kind of metaphysics, borrowed, perhaps, by James Charles from his private reading of Locke and Harris, and arbitrarily interpreted by him in lectures to the boys of the head and second classes. And in all these branches of solid education, Ned Fennell, although an idle boy, soon made such progress as to become rather a favorite with his preceptor.

But it was in an additional branch—the ornamental one, namely, of declamation—Ned so excelled, in the estimation of James Charles Buchmahon, all his young rivals, that the pedagogue might be said to have grown, on that account, fond of the boy. For James Charles thought declamation a very fine thing himself, and imperceptibly believed that he shone in it. And little Ned's close imitation of his master's conventional manner of "making points," in different dramatic scenes and passages, quite flattered the heart of James Charles Buchmahon.

Ned could repeat, for instance, "my name is Norway," to the lot of what his teacher regarded as the excellence of theatrical recitation; and when he came to the words, "round as my shield," not James Charles himself could more gallantly extend his left arm, and more expressively make the forefinger of his right hand revolve again, and again, and again, around an invisible shield, supposed to be buckled on the protruded limb. Again, in Richard's soliloquy on Bosworth field, when the tyrant says, "I'll try to sleep here into morn," Ned would pop, quite as naturally as his instructor ever did, on one knee, leaning his elbow on a form, and covering his face with his hand; and afterwards, when he started up, roaring out, "give me another horse—bind up my wounds," the shiver of both his hands—not a tiny shake, that might not perhaps be distinctly understood—but a good, palpable, palsy motion, that at a glance you knew betokened mortal terror—was, after himself, perfection in James Charles's eyes. And when Neddy Fennell became transformed into Hotspur, and was describing the pop, he would so closely copy his master's "stage business," in the situation, that once or twice James Charles nearly applauded him in an indecorous manner. For after covering the palm of his left hand with its proper fingers, to imitate the "pounce-box," he would tap the middle and third finger, by way of its lid, and then deliberately raising up these two, he would delve the finger and thumb of his right hand into the open space, and supply them with a monstrous pinch of pounce-powder, and then dispose of it in the cavities of his nose with such a solemn and intense relish, that surely no other individual, one excepted, ever gave so faithful a picture of nature's self. As to his personification of Will Boniface, in which he had to thrust out his little person in order to make a paunch, and keep one arm akimbo, and straddle and waddle in his walk, and speak down in his throat, and puff out his cheeks, and drink "his ale" from the fist of his diseased hand, smacking his lips after each draught—in this character, James Charles almost admitted "a rival near the throne."

But the pleasure and admiration imparted by Ned Fennell's powers of declamation were not exclusively enjoyed by James Charles Buchmahon. When Neddy went through his different parts at home, that is under Father Connell's roof, the old man would look on at the serious sketches with great wonder; and during his protegee's enacting of such characters as Will Boniface, would move his head and his arms together up and down, and gently smite his knees with the palms of his hands, and laugh until he cried.

And when he took Neddy by the hand, and led him to dinner at Gaby McNeary's, as was often the case—for as little Helen has hinted, the old priest, and the old priest-later had become the greatest friends in the world—Ned, in the hours of recreation during the evening, had at least two additional admirers in old Gaby's house. Indeed, glancing back again homewards for a moment, Mick Dempsey and Mrs. Molloy occasionally formed another portion of his applauding audience, the latter exclaiming, very nearly in the words of Mrs. Quickly at the Boar's Head, "he does it as like one of those harlot players, as ever I see" (Mrs. Molloy had never seen one); and Tom Naddy would also be allowed to look on, although he was never known to show the slightest interest in the exhibition, no more than in any other exhibition or circumstance under the sun.

And along with all these things, it will be gratifying to have it known, that Father Connell continued to love, as much as he admired,

his adopted son. He studied Neddy attentively and anxiously, but found nothing positively evil in him. He was a truth-loving boy, not a jot of meanness was in his nature, he was a grateful and an affectionate boy, and he regularly, of his own accord, attended to all his religious duties; so that the old priest could not help loving him.

And yet, while he loved, he also feared for Neddy. The young lad's actions, though seldom blameworthy, too often sprang from impulse, when they should have resulted from principle. He dearly liked frolic and fun, and in his eagerness for either would, now and then, forget a duty. In choosing objects on which to exercise his practical jokes, he did not always distinguish between the fit and the unfit, between those persons who might afford to bear a boy's jest, and those whom the boy's sense of veneration ought to have spared from such an impertinence. And all this too Father Connell thought he saw. He did not see, however, how much of the contradiction of Neddy's character, at this time of his life, was caused by the stealthy and unsuspected influence, and the inscrutable humor of another person—namely, Tom Naddy, "the priest's boy." For instance—

"I want you to write a bit in a letter for me, sir," said Tom to him one evening. "Surely you can write it yourself, Tom." "I couldn't write it out handsome enough, Master Neddy: 'tis so long sense I done a thing of the kind, my hand is out, somehow." "Well then, Tom, I'll do it for you." And without a single inquiry about the nature of the epistle to be written, he hurried off Tom to the little osier arbor at the top of the priest's garden, and at that person's dictation he wrote as follows:—

"HONORABLE SIR,—I am a poor, distressed creature, with a wife and seven small children, and I can't get a stroke of work to do, and I come to crave your charity. While there is plenty of beef and mutton, and the best of bacon in your kitchen, to give you more than enough every day in the year, and while you have the good meat to throw away, I haven't a potato to give to my destitute family; and while you have your cellar full of choice wine to drink into yourself, morning, noon, and night, I haven't one sup of sour milk to wet the lips of myself, my wife, or my children: so God reward you, sir, and out of your plentiful store give a small charity to a poor forlorn soul."

"That'll do iligant," remarked Tom. "And what are you going to do with it?" asked Ned.

"I'll tell you another time, sir: an' I'll engage for the present that the poor, forlorn sowl will get a big charity on the head of it." And Master Tom Naddy pocketed, and walked slowly off, with the document, after he had obtained Ned Fennell's solemn promise—a promise very unthinkingly given, for in fact Ned's head was full of something else—not to tell any living being, that he, Tom Naddy, had had anything to do with the fabrication of the said document.

Early the next day, as Father Connell sat in his little parlor, a very miserable, poor man, introduced by Mrs. Molloy, presented him with a letter.

The priest read it hastily over, fixing his eyes, once or twice on the face of its bearer. He then bestowed on it a more leisurely perusal; and now the glances which he shot towards the surprised and fear-stricken poor claimant, were, for Father Connell, unusually vivacious. He next reflected for a moment; and finally started up, seized the now re-rolling sowl by the arm, and hurried him into the kitchen.

"Now, sir," he said, pointing to the almost bare walls, "where is the beef, and the mutton, and the bacon for me to feast upon, while you and your family are fasting at home?—show them to me!—where are they, I say?"

"Your Reverence, I—"

"Shame upon you, shame upon you, man, to belie me in such a manner."

"Sir—sir—"

"Shame upon you! if the Lord made you poor, he gave you no license to belie your priest; come along with me still!"

The astounded sowl found himself again forced forward, out of the kitchen. Father Connell placed him before the half-barrel of ale, which, without any kind of enclosure, to screen it from observation, stood, "under the stairs;" and causing him, forcing him indeed, to bend his neck and shoulders, he put him too half-way under the stairs, while he continued:

"And there is my cellar for you—the only cellar I have; take out of it, if you please, a bottle of the choice wine, that I drink, morning, noon, and night; come, find it, I say—find it!—find me a bottle of the choice wine!"

"I don't see any kind of wine at all here, sir, I protest."

"Well then; come out of that, and stand before me."

The terrified man obeyed, crawling backward, like a crab.

Your nature must be very uncharitable, good man, and very bold and daring too—to come into my house, and to my very face charge me with the sin of gluttony, and with the sin of intemperance; and you must also be a very great fool, to imagine that you could expect a benefaction from the man you calumniated. I am ashamed of you, my good man—I am, indeed, and I wonder at you; on my word I do."

In addition to his former consternation, no one could possibly look more astonished, than now did the person thus addressed. It was evident to him, that he was accused of some crime, but of what kind he could not for his soul conjecture. Why he had been half-dragged into the kitchen, and under the stairs, to look for beef, mutton, bacon, and choice wine, where none was to be found, seemed another mystery, inexplicable to the poor, stupid fellow; and the upshot of it was, that tears came into his eyes, and coursed through the wrinkles of his cheeks. He moved in silence to quit the presence of his offended priest.

But Father Connell had not bargained for this at all. In an instant his pious displeasure left him; pity, if not remorse, touched his heart, and he brushed a tear from his own old eyes as he called out—"stop, my good man." The wretched being, somewhat reassured by the present kindness of the clergyman's tone, did so.

"I see you are sorry for your fault, and I forgive you; you are penitent—that's enough; what reconciles us to our God surely ought to make us friends with one another. But let me warn you against calumniating your neighbor in future: it is a grievous, grievous sin. Go home now to your family; he took the man's hand, and while shaking it, and squeezing it, deposited in his palm the few pieces of silver he could find in his pockets:—"go; I forgive you from my heart, distress makes me bitter and censorious; go, and may God bless you."

The poor man, now weeping plentifully, dropped on his knee to receive the blessing, and then hurried out of the house.

Throughout these occurrences, Tom Naddy had been peeping, now from one corner, now from another; and laughing—not audibly, but silently in all the cavities next to his heart.

Father Connell again sat down in his little parlor, and again took up and read the strange petition he had just received. In a few minutes he laid it down before him, with a sudden and very painful suspicion in his mind. It struck him now, for the first time, that he knew the handwriting. He examined it more closely, and conviction followed, and with it came a pang, perhaps the bitterest which, during his life, he had ever known, and he laid his forehead on his hands while it swayed him.

After some time he arose, his almost white eyebrows knitted and depressed, and Tom Naddy heard him walking very rapidly about the parlor. In a few minutes he folded up the paper, put it in his pocket, and left the house.

Proceeding to the residence, in a remote suburb street, of the person who had brought him the letter, Father Connell questioned the poor man about it. "Who wrote it for him?" He had never asked any one to write it. It had been brought to him by a young lad, of that lad's own accord, who assured him that if he presented it to Father Connell much good would thereby result to him and his family. "Had he since then read the letter, or got any one to do so for him?" No, the petitioner could not read writing himself, and didn't wish to be troublesome to any one else on the subject. "Did he know the lad's names?" Yes, but he had pledged his solemn word not to reveal it to a human being; he would disclose it to Father Connell, however, if the clergyman wished. But Father Connell instantly demurred: no man, he said, could pretend to release another from the engagement of a solemn promise; and he returned to his house.

About this time of the day Ned Fennell was also moving homeward from the English Academy, capering and swinging his satchel round his head, and "as hungry as a hound," according to himself, for his dinner. Tom Naddy met him some distance from their abode.

"You won't forget that I have your word pledged to me, Master Ned?" said Tom.

"I'll keep my word like a man, when it is pledged; but what have I pledged it about now? I quite forget."

"You pledged me your solemn word, that you'd never let it be known to any one in the wide world, that it was I put you on to writing the letter last night."

"Oh, ay, I have it now; it quite went out of my mind: so never fear; my word to you shall be kept."

They parted. Ned was soon knocking at Father Connell's door. Mrs. Molloy opened it to him. He took hold of both her hands and shook them violently.

"Will you never learn to be easy an' quiet, Master Neddy?" she asked in words of reproach, while her very beard smiled in approval of the lad's greeting, which she cordially returned.

"I'll be as quiet as a lamb while I am eating my dinner, Mrs. Molloy: so walk in here and get it for me."

He tied his satchel to her apron-string, passed an arm through one of hers, and strutted at her side towards the house, looking up and grimacing into her face—all to the great delight of the good old lady, although she threatened to box his ears, "if he wouldn't be quiet, and leave her alone." The boy entered the little parlor with his usual salutation of respect, and his smile of real affection; but the cheery reply of "Welcome home, Neddy, my child," was not on this occasion accorded to him.—The old man nodded gravely, and motioned to him to become seated to the little table, on which his dinner was usually laid.

Poor Ned felt chilled, and, though he could not suspect why, terrified. His frugal meal was quickly placed before him by Mrs. Molloy, who gabbled something or other, to which neither the priest nor his protegee answered a word. It was over, and still perfect silence continued; and, notwithstanding the boy's late boast of ravenousness, he had scarcely eaten a mouthful. He now glanced towards Father Connell, and perceived that he sat with crossed knees and folded arms, and a very picture of old age sorrowing.

"Come hither, Neddy Fennell," said the clergyman at last. The boy stood to his knee.

"Neddy, I knew you were fond of a frolic, and thoughtless and giddy in pursuing it; but I passed this over, because I always was sure that your jokes came into your head, without a plan, and without an intention of doing harm to any one; and I said to myself, that riper years would make you more steady. But I was wrong in part of my judgment, Neddy Fennell. I now find out, and it gives me great trouble at my heart to know the fact, that you use fore-cast, and take your leisure to lay a plan, for the purpose of having your joke; yes, Neddy, and you can think, and call it sport to make laughter for yourself, out of the sorrows and sufferings of the poor, and to mock, and turn into a scoff, your best friend in this world, Neddy; and a very old man too, Neddy; a very old man, and your priest."

Neddy was vehemently beginning to utter something.

"Hush, child do not add to your offences, by saying what is not the truth. I have often told you, that one lie puts us into the power of the father of lies."

"I have never told you a lie, sir; I never will tell you a lie, sir; but—"

"Do not interrupt me, Neddy. Do not merely promise me the truth; but answer me at present in the truth. Is that your handwriting?" he held the letter out to him. Having glanced over it, Neddy did not immediately answer. A vague thought of Tom Naddy's treachery began to break upon his mind. Father Connell sternly repeated his question.

"Yes, sir," he replied, in a very humble tone, "this was written by me."

"I thought so, Neddy; indeed I was sure of it; and yet, your own words make me sadder than ever."

The boy was about to explain, with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, how he had been induced to write it, and of course by whom; but a recollection of his solemn promise to Tom Naddy checked him, and when the old priest had uttered the last words, Neddy Fennell began crying bitterly. He saw that he could not escape from the most disgraceful of charges, and despair very nearly possessed him.

"Listen to me, child. I loved you, I loved you as a father; as your father in the spirit, and for the sake of him who left us the new commandment—'love one another.'—And indeed, Neddy, I think—I fear—that I loved you too well, in a mere human yearning of the heart also; and that I am, therefore, now punished. 'Tis quite true, my child, Abraham never loved Isaac, and Isaac never loved Jacob, more than I loved you; and Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing comfort, because they were not, never I believe, sorrowed over the loss of them more truly, than I now sorrow over your falling off."

Father Connell's broken voice interrupted him; and Neddy could now only go on crying until his grief became a passionate paroxysm.

"Well, Neddy, I see you are sorry for your crime—and that is something. But my duty towards you plainly tells me that you ought to suffer more. Your crime calls out for chastisement, my child—painful, bodily chastisement, I am commissioned to pluck up by the roots, this instant the vices that are beginning to sprout in your young heart; lest that heart might become an unfeeling one in your manhood, and make you, when the grave covers me, a bold and careless scoffer of all that is holy in earthly misfortune, and, worse than that, in religion, Neddy."

The young lad flung himself upon his knees, and with clasped hands was beginning an appeal, though he still had resolved not to break his pledge to Tom Naddy.

"It is no use, child; it is no use: stand up and walk on before me into the yard." The priest as yet could only think that he was petitioning against the infliction of the promised chastisement. Arrived in the yard, Father Connell commanded him to enter "the black hole," and not to leave it till he should be brought out for further punishment. Ned obeyed in silence. This "black hole," was a small shed, built to one side of the little yard, and used as a storehouse for coals and other fuel. Father Connell hapsed its door upon

him; for it had no lock, and Ned heard his footsteps leaving the premises.

Not many minutes had elapsed, when the hasp was briskly unlocked, however, the door flung open, and the burly person of the house-keeper seen by Neddy supplying its place; that is, shutting out the light of day, almost as effectually as ever it had done.

"What mischief did you do now, you misfortunate sky-bow?" she hoarsely demanded.

There was no answer to the lady's question. She peered in. Her pet was sitting on a lump of coal, his hands covering his face; and she saw his breast heaving with sobs, while tears escaped over the backs of his hands. Mrs. Molloy had never seen him in such a mood before.

"Lord be good to me, sowl an' body, what's the matter with you, child?"

Still no answer.

"Will you spake to me, will you, you poor boy? Will you, I say; is it crying you are for being put in here? For what reason would that make you cry? Aint I come to let you out?"

"I'm not crying for being put in here," at last sobbed Ned, "but I'm crying to think, that Father Connell would have it on his mind, that I could make sport of him, and of a poor starving man and his family; it's that I am crying for Peggy."

"An' tell me, my lanna, what happened to make the priest think that wrong of you?"

"No matter, Peggy; I can't tell you about it; he will tell you himself; I can't; that's all."

"Keep it all to yourself then, you obstinate little mule, what need I care?—Ned, agra, tell me what's the matter; sure I'll do my best to bring you over it; that's a good boy; tell me now."

"No, Peggy—I say again I can't."

"Well, bottle it up and smoke it. Make ducks an' drakes of it, my honey!—Neddy, avoutneen, what is it about, at all, at all?"

Ned only shook his head.

"You won't won't you? I don't care an outd-rush, whether you do or no, you scatter-brained scapegrace. Neddy, my darlin', won't you tell me?"

"If I could tell any one, I'd tell you, Peggy. But I made a solemn promise, that I wouldn't tell a living creature."

"Stop, an' make merry on your promise then, an' much good may it do you. Come out o' that, mynow: here—come out, I bid you."

"Peggy, I won't leave this, until the priest comes back; I'll go through everything he bids me."

"Come out to me this moment!"

"I will not, Peggy."

"No? Och, och, isn't this a poor case? Do you want to torment the sowl an' body out o' me? Do you want to vex the very liver in me? You cross-grained, bull-headed, bit o' a boy; I'll make you come out, or I'll know for what's!"

She stooped, and was making a grasp at her favorite, when her well-starched cap encountered the claw of a rusty nail, at the top of the door-way, and by it was whisked off her head, while her disengaged grey locks tumbled about her face. But, she returned to the charge, and was dragging out Neddy perforce, when Father Connell's voice sounded deeply and authoritatively at her back:—

"Peggy, do not meddle with the boy."

"But I will meddle with the boy. Do you want to make a peel-garlic of the creature? Do you want to put him in his airy grave? Fie, for shame on your Reverence! There isn't a lovin'er sowl, for yourself, an' myself, uthder the livin' sun, this blessed minit."

"Come out at my bidding, Neddy Fennell," said the priest. Neddy obeyed at once.

Standing at Father Connell's back, appeared Mick Dempsey, master of the parish poor-school, clad as spruce as ever, and his scarlet watch-ribbon straking down his thigh, and behind him again stood Tom Naddy, his hands crippled into each other, his lips were fixed as if for whistling, although no such sound reached the by-standers. And did Ned's eyes deceive him? Was there no sorrow upon his features for the boy he had placed in sore trouble?

Ned looked at him again, and it was, he assured himself, an expression of gratified cunning solely, which played through the puckers around the whistler's mouth. And, oh, how his blood raged at this discovery—and what would he not have given to let fly in clenched fists, at that moment, into his old friend's face!

But Father Connell commanded him to walk before him into the parlor, Mick Dempsey and Tom Naddy following; and while Mrs. Molloy was still engaged forcing her stiff, stubborn hair under her reclaimed cap, and muttering to herself all the time, against the tyranny practiced on "her poor lovin' boy," the priest had locked the parlor door on the inside upon himself and his present party.

"Have you brought the birch with you, Mr. Dempsey?" he now solemnly inquired.

"I have so, sir, 'pon my word," placidly answered Mick, and he produced from under his coat a besom of select birch-twigs, almost large enough to sweep the floor of his own