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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

Honestly to resume. Fifty shirts, fifty little felt hats, fifty frize coats and waistcoats, fifty pairs of the now (we trust) immortalised "ma-as," and at least twenty-five pairs of stockings and brogues were heaped before Father Connell, in his school-house; and many more than fifty poor little creatures assembled, upon the coldest day that came that year, each hoping to be chosen as a fit claimant upon the bounty of his parish-priest.

On entering the school-room, the good man's compassion had been forcibly appealed to, as many of the almost naked children, ranged on the forms at either hand, turned up to his face (while their little bodies cringed, and their teeth chattered) beseeching, and yet doubting eyes, whose lids fluttered, and could not for a moment meet his questioning regard. In fact, he knew the meaning of these self-doubting, mute appeals of the wretched urchins, and his primitive notions of justice battling with them, he was made unhappy. For in truth his keen glance discovered, among the greater number of the wearers of the petitioning faces, individuals who were very irregular attendants in his school; whereas, the Christmas clothing had been publicly notified to be intended for the most regular visitants of it, taking always into account the most generally deserving also; so that he plainly understood that a great portion of the present expectants were not, in point of strict school discipline, entitled to the promised periodical favors.

And this discovery, while it grieved, also puzzled Father Connell. Rigidly, and properly speaking, these young outlaws and street-idlers, who daily sinned against his constant admonitions, deserved no such reward. Yet how could he send out again, into the snow, which drifted upon a cutting north-east blast, against the windows of the school-house, their little shivering carcasses? He turned his back upon them, looked out through the window at the weather, shook his head, prohibitory of the measure, while a few drops, too warm and fresh from the heart for that weather or anything else to freeze, stole from his winking eyes. He quitted the window and walked up and down the school-room, pondering over the difficulty in his way. He sternly regarded the young vagabonds again and again; and, as if in answer to his every look, they cringed together, more and more piteously. What was to be done?—and he resumed his walk up and down the room; and finally stopped short again, nodded, but now approvingly to himself, and quite upright and austerely, went to Mick Dempsey and addressed him.

"Mister Dempsey," for in this style already noticed, he always spoke to Mick, in the presence of his pupils; "Mister Dempsey, I'd be thankful if you call over the list of your regular scholars, and then let every boy who answers to his name, come down to this end of the school-room;" and he bowed and waved his hand to Mr. Dempsey, while pronouncing aloud his last request.

Mr. Dempsey obeyed the command; and when the muster-roll had been gone through, more than twenty, alas, of unfortunate young scamps, not comprised in it, remained huddled together at the other end of the apartment, with what looks of bitter disappointment must be imagined.

The priest then took Mr. Dempsey by the arm, and led him into a corner, where their whispered conference could not be overheard.

"Mick, the poor children below are strangers to our school, ar'n't they, Mick?"

"I hardly ever saw them here before, sir; and now they only come to impose on your Reverence for the Christmas clothing."

"Mick, this is bitter weather, and the unfortunate little wretches have scarce a tatter to cover them against it, my good boy."

"But they have no right to get the clothes, sir, from our own regular boys."

"That is true; very true, Mick; and I know it is a bad example to encourage the idle to the loss of the industrious; so that I believe, to speak honestly and fairly, they ought to be turned out into the snow, without getting any clothes at all. But, Mick, they'd perish, they'd perish in this severe weather, they would indeed, poor little creatures—they'd perish, Mick," and he took the schoolmaster's hand and squeezed it, and shook it, and looked into his eyes appealingly, as if he would turn him from the rigid justice of the case, to its more merciful side.

"It would be a cruel thing, Mick," he continued, "to send them out, to have the snow and the biting wind going through their naked bodies?"

"It would indeed, sir, but—"

The priest stopped him, before he could go beyond the admission he sought for; he did not want to hear the other side of the question at all. "Well, well, Mick;—ay," and he more emphatically squeezed the hand he held, while his old face grew bright again. "I think I see how we are to manage it;" and now he

whispered certain instructions into the schoolmaster's ear, holding his mouth very close to that organ, lest a breath of the purpose of his plan should be overheard.

"Give me the cat-o'-nine-tails, sir," he said next, in a loud and tyrannical voice; and having received into his hands the awful weapon, he walked with a lowering brow, and a more than ever erect person, towards the now terrified candidates for attire which they had not deserved.

"You unfortunate little street-trotting sinners," he said, "how dare you come here to attempt to impose on Mr. Dempsey and myself? you have never come here before, or very seldom at least; and you have spent the time, you ought to have spent here, in idleness, and of course in sin; for don't you know, that idleness is the father and mother of sin, and that sin destroys both the body and the soul? don't you know all this, you little vagabonds? And yet like the drones of the bee-hive, you would now devour the honey without having helped to gather it in; yes—you now come here to ask for rewards that belong to more deserving boys; but I'll give you your true reward; I'll flog every one of you, one after the other, and that will keep you warm; every one of you." Having delivered this oration in a tremendous voice, he flourished the cat-o'-nine-tails above his head, and all the offenders (except one, who stood in suppressed gloom on the threshold of the doorway, half observant, and wholly prepared to escape into the street the moment it became urgently necessary), all the offenders emitted an anticipatory yell of torture, and jumped up on the forms, or even on the desk, or knelt down, or rolled over each other on the dusty floor.

But the flourishing of the cat-o'-nine-tails was a signal agreed upon between Mick Dempsey and himself; and Mick, therefore, now advanced towards the seemingly enraged patron of the school.

"Come, Mr. Dempsey, have all these young cheats flogged one by one, for bad and idle boys, and for imposing on you and me."

Louder than ever arose the despairing shrieks of the culprits.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mick, "but may be if you forgive them, they will be better boys for the future."

"Oh! we will, sir, we will—it's we that will!" shouted the score of impostors.

"I'm afraid there is little chance of that, Mr. Dempsey," gloomily demurred the priest.

"If his Reverence forgives you, will you promise to be good boys for the time to come?"

A new and overpowering assent was given to the schoolmaster's proposition.

"Well; if I thought they would mend, I might be prevailed upon to forgive them," resumed Father Connell; "but is there any one here to go bail for them?"

"I will myself, sir; I'll be their bail to you that they will be good boys and attend to their school, sir."

"Very good; very good, Mr. Dempsey;—do you hear what the master says, ye young sinners?"

The persons addressed, failed not to answer that they did hear very well indeed, and their former pledges of reformation were once more uttered in a great clamor; tones of hope and pleasure at their relief from the cat-o'-nine-tails, and now cadencing, however, their voices; and their priest, interpreting the result only in the way he had wished it to be, immediately rejoined—"Very well, very well, then I forgive you for the present; and Mister Dempsey forgives you; and I hope God will forgive you; so now, come with me to the other end of the room; come, my boys, come; come up here at the rest—there is more joy in heaven," he continued, as he approached the more deserving claimants for winter clothing, speaking in a loud voice, that they might hear him, and as solemnly, and sincerely as if he addressed an adult congregation of his little altar; "there is more joy in heaven for the repentance of one sinner, than for ninety-nine just."

And now he distributed equally among the righteous and the unrighteous, as well as his judgment permitted, the pile of winter garments, "ma-as" and all. One of the very last who shyly lingered to claim his bounty, was the boy whom we have mentioned, during the flourishing of the "cat-o'-nine-tails," as standing upon the threshold of the school-room door—prepared to escape into the street, in case of emergency. And, in truth, this little fellow was, perhaps, the very least entitled to share in the holiday donations, for, indeed, he had never before been in the priest's seminary at all; and yet he seemed to want, perhaps, more than any of the half-naked petitioners around him, some protection against the bad weather. Father Connell had personally inspected the donning of his little gifts, and now did the same towards the boy before him. While the little stranger put on his new dress, tears were seen to fall plentifully from his eyes, and he suddenly glanced up into Father Connell's face. The old priest started, seized his arm, and led him close to a window.

"What is your name, my child?"

"Neddy Fennell, sir."

"Neddy Fennell! And are you the Neddy

Fennell that used to fix my surplice on me in the sacristy, and hurt my foot by treading on it?"

"I am indeed, sir, the same Neddy Fennell." "Poor child! how changed you are, then, God bless me! and I was wondering what had become of yourself and your mother, and your poor aunt!—after your poor father died, you know, I often went to see ye all, Neddy; but then came my absence from the parish, on business, for a long while; and then the bad fever, that left me weakly, within the house, for a longer time still; and it was only the other day I could creep out to ask after you, when I missed you out of the choir; and then your mother's house was shut up, and no one could tell me where you had all gone—only that great poverty had overtaken ye; and is this true, Neddy? And are ye so very poor, Neddy?"

"We are, indeed, very, very poor, sir."

"God bless me! poor child, poor child! and where does your mother live now, Neddy Fennell?"

"In a cabin on the green, sir."

"Well, Neddy, well; you'll show me where your mother lives, and I will go see her with you; wait for me until the boys go home by the bosheen, and go there you with them; but don't go home with them—don't go anywhere without me; poor child, poor child—I must see your poor mother. Now, Mick," continued the priest, again whispering the schoolmaster confidentially, "the snow-storm is nearly over, and I will go into the bosheen, where no one can oversee or overhear us—and I will wait at the churchyard gate, till you come up to me with the boys."

And in a few minutes the old gentleman occupied his post where he had mentioned it as situated—at the little gate of the churchyard of his chapel; and half secreted between its piers he stood. "The Bosheen,"—a solitary and unfrequented green lane, running to his right and to his left.

For a few minutes he waited here, smiling to himself, and clawing the palms of his hands with his fingers; and anon, his ears were gratified by the expected sound of a great many little feet, softly tramping through the yet thin layer of snow, in the bosheen; and in a few seconds more, appeared Mick Dempsey heading his army of newly-clad pupils, who coming on in great order, only two abreast, formed a goodly column. They slowly defiled before their priest and patron, each as he came up, squeezing hard, betwixt his finger and thumb, the narrow brim of his little felt hat, chucking it downwards, and the head it contained along with it; and then abruptly letting go, that both might bob back again to their usual position, and so altogether performing a bow to his Reverence. And for every bow he got, every single one, Father Connell gave another bow, performed with studied suavity, though his face all the while glittered; and when the troop had quite passed by, he stooped forward, leaning his hands on his knees, to peep after them; and again standing upright, he clasped those hands softly together, and laughed, almost shouted forth his delight, while not tears alone, but little streamlets of tears, of happy, happy, tears trickled down his bloomy old cheeks.

It was some time before his outbreak of enjoyment permitted Father Connell's mind to recur to his engagement, with Neddy Fennell; but now suddenly starting, he looked about him for his young friend; saw the boy standing timidly and alone, at a little distance, walked hastily to him, seized him by the hand, and under his guidance went to visit the widow of poor Atty Fennell.

CHAPTER VI.

"The Green," so called by Neddy Fennell, had not a bit of green about it, being a space, enclosed at three sides, by the wretched cabins, and at the fourth side by the high wall of the county hospital, within which that sedate edifice stood. The cabins were tenanted by the poorest of the poor. Their thatch half rotten, and falling in; with holes in their clay walls for windows, and holes in their roofs for smoke vents; and if ever the semblance of a chimney rose above one of them, it was contrived of a kind of osier-work, plastered with mud. Upon the area of the ground thus hemmed in, presided disorder, and want of cleanliness, in many inert varieties: heaps of manure before each door, and everywhere about, carefully collected by the inhabitants, as their most considerable source of wealth; little pools of dirty water, and puddle in all weathers; stones, great and small, wherever they could find room; while through these pleasing resorts pigs grunted and wallowed, vicious cur dogs barked, and gambolled, or else snarled and quarrelled, and bit each other; miserable half starved cocks and hens stalked here and there, in quest of something to pick up, and found nothing; and half naked, and sometimes wholly naked, children ran, shouting, and playing, and enjoying themselves.

Fronting the hospital gate, but nearer to the opposite side of the irregular square, the gallows destined for the reception of city malefactors of the highest degree, used, occasionally—yet, we are bound to say, very seldom, re-collecting the mass of squalid poverty around

it—to be erected; and this was one feature of notoriety for the green, from which it improved on Neddy Fennell's appellation, and was once more emphatically termed Gallows Green. But there was also another trait of its celebrity, now to be indicated.

It had, time immemorial, been a kind of city corporate commonage. Everything with and without life might take possession of it; no questions asked; and the liberal indulgence was not long unacknowledged. When the hospital was being built, sand had been scooped irregularly, here and there, from beneath the surface of the green nearest to the edifice's site, so that, after its completion, and the erection of its boundary wall, hollows remained. Upon the verge of one of these, or haply at its bottom, some speculating vagabond pauper experimentally ventured to erect a hovel, still more wretched than the buildings enclosing three sides of the space around it. How he procured the materials, even for such a dwelling, Heaven and he know—not we. No one interrupted his proceedings, and he lived for years rent-free and tax-free; and in every way luxuriantly free, in his new house. His success emboldened others like himself to imitate his example; and in a few years, copies of his domicile, perhaps to the amount of one hundred or of one hundred and fifty, were to be seen on the edges, or on the sinking sides, or in the very depths of the old gravel-pits, and the population of the precious colony soon became very numerous.

To get into this jumble of miserable dwellings was a puzzle; to get out of it, once in, a still greater one; for it contained no streets, no lanes, no alleys, no enclosed spots, no straight ways, no level ways; but hovel turned its back upon hovel, or its side, or its gable, or stood upon the verge of an excavation, or upon the declivity, or at the bottom of one, as before hinted; so that a stranger venturing into the settlements in quest of any one or anything, could not know where he was going, or where to go, unless conducted by the hand of an initiated resident; as to escaping into the green again, without such friendly agency, the thing was romantically out of the question, and if he were a tall broad-shouldered man, he must have squeezed his way through almost every random opening available for his progress. In truth, compared with the difficulties of this labyrinth the enigma of "The walls of Troy," inscribed by urchins on their slates at school, was a mere nothing; and in our Charitable Society, from which the week's president was sometimes deputed to pay the locality a visit, it became jocosely fabled that a shower of houses had fallen—no time specified—from the clouds, upon this uninhabited portion of Gallow's Green, tumbling here and there, helter-skelter, and so remaining to the period we speak of. And "the shower of houses" became a distinguishing title of the quarter.

A word as to the probable nature of the characters inhabiting "the shower of houses." At the first glance we recognise them as a set of unhappy creatures, all living in one way or another by chance. At the second, it is admitted that many among them were composed of individuals so modest as to retire occasionally from the notice of the mayor, magistrates, constables, and other nice critics of the adjacent city and suburbs: for once within the sanctuary of the shower of houses, a person of seclusive habits might sequester himself for any given time; the approach of an uninvited visitor spreading from house to house with telegraphic despatch, and the object of such a visit being helped at every hand, to lie secret or escape; while it would have taken a *cordon miltaire*, shoulder to shoulder, round about the colony, to prevent the egress of any one in it; as to catching amid its subtleties that "any one," you might as well—to use the boastful language of the natives themselves, you might as well "look for a needle in a bundle of straw."

It will of course be borne in mind, that we have sketched a place in existence about thirty-five years ago. "The Green," is at present very much improved. Some years since, its civic proprietors established a right of doing what they liked with its little Alsatia; from which circumstance resulted the fact, that the shower of houses vanished from the face of the earth; and— but we cannot indeed loiter to point out any of the other changes for the better, now visible upon Gallows Green.

Neddy Fennell stopped his patron before the habitation they had come to seek—one of a piece with all those around it. As Father Connell stood at its threshold, his hat touched the eave of its roof of rotten thatch. Its clay-built walls were mouldering; its foundations crumbling away; there was not a good promise held forth by its whole appearance that it could adhere together for half an hour. To one side of its clumsy patched door was a badly shaped oval hole, the only vent through which, excepting the open doorway, the smoke from within could in mild weather get out, or the light, and the miasmatic vapor floating abroad, and called fresh air, get in. But in the piercing cold and pelting storms of the season at present, this hole was stopped with a mysterious bundle of old rags and straw, and the curiously contrived old door also shut.

The initiated Neddy Fennell raised its latch by tugging at a knotted string. Father Connell entered the dwelling, bending almost double in order to do so. He stood in the middle of a puddled earthen floor, upon which the thawing snow from above, oozing through the decayed or partially open thatch, dripped and splashed; not, however, without becoming tinted in its descent by the depositions of soot formed, time out of mind, upon the therefore blackened sticks that very firmly supported the roof of the edifice, staining everything it fell upon into a dingy brown, and hence termed "soot-rain." The walls around him were bare clay, as bare as their out-sides, excepting the fact of their being japanned with smoke.

The length of the hut, from end to end, might be about twelve feet. Quite along this extent ran a mud partition, not, however, reaching to the roof, and closing an inner apartment some two short paces in breadth, a doorless blank orifice in the dividing screen affording entrance into it. Against the gable, to our priest's right as he entered, a very little grate was contrived, ingeniously fixed in yellow clay hobs, and fashioned out of pieces of old iron hoops, obtained we cannot venture to affirm how or where; and in this grate burned, or rather brightly glowed a brisk fire—glowed we say, because the little balls of mixed clay and ashes composing its materials emitted no flame, but went on igniting like a kiln; not failing, however, to spread through the shut-up apartment—unsupplied of course with a chimney, a sulphurous, and otherwise choking vapor, which made any strange visitor cough and sneeze, much against his will.

Before the ardent little fire, and almost touching it, squatted a middle-aged woman, dressed in rags and tatters; cooking upon a "griddle" (a round flat piece of iron), a cake which occupied the full space of her apparatus; and curious to relate, she was so happy in her den of seeming wretchedness, that she endeavored to shape her cracked voice into what was intended for a merry song.

Catching the sound made by the old squeaking door as Father Connell came in, the woman stopped short in her melody, though not in her cooking process; and without turning or looking behind her, jocularly shouted out—

"Ah, then, the devil welcome you, honey, and is that yourself?"

A step or two brought Father Connell close upon her. These steps did not sound like those she had expected to hear. She glanced sideways at the feet and legs which now almost came in contact with her own. The friend she had counted on, and for whom her salutation was intended, certainly did not wear black knee-breeches, and large silver buckles in his shoes. She looked quite up, and recognised the formidable hat and wig of her parish priest; and then, with surprising agility, up she bounced from her squatting position, retreated as far as the dimensions of her dwelling would permit, and there clasping her hands, gazed in terror at the old clergyman.

"I fear the word that is on your lips is in your heart," he said sternly, "sinful woman."

"Och, then, may the word choke me if—"

"Stop!—or I fear you may get your prayer; I fear you will die with that very word in your mouth."

"I won't—I won't, your Rivinnee!—I'll die a good Christian."

"Well, well—God mend you—God mend you," and Father Connell passed into the inner chamber of her house.

Here, not able to see distinctly any object, he called at the orifice, through which he had squeezed himself, for a light; the woman without came with some burning straw in her hand, which only flared for an instant, and then left him in redoubled darkness. He asked for a candle, and unable to procure such a luxury herself, the dame tucked up her tatters and left the wigwam to hunt, as she said, "among the good neighbors for a scrap of one;" during which hunt she did not fail to telegraph through the shower of houses, that their most dreaded enemy, their parish priest, was among them.

She came back, however, with something like the article for which she had issued forth; by the aid of which her visitor now discerned two female figures stretched upon loose and damp straw, shaken into two separate beds, as it were, over the puddled earthen floor; while their bodies were covered with some indefinable patchwork of shreds and rags, and while the roof over them now and then sent down heavy drops; and one of these women was the Widow Fennell, and the other her aunt Mary. The old priest's blood ran cold; his heart wept within him; but he tried to keep down his feelings. Obtaining an old three-legged stool from the next apartment, he sat down on it at the head of the miserable couch, now occupied by the once idolized pet of a comfortable home; took her little bony hand, and listened to her sad tale of explanation.

"After her husband's death," she said, "everything went wrong with her; she was no good," continued her little, feeble, murmuring voice; "she could only mope, cry, and fret all the live-long day; and the wicked journeyman that Arthur Fennell left behind him, in his shop—God forgive her if she wronged him!—"