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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XX.

Robin Costigan and his apprentice gained the street. It was still very dark, though past midnight. Persons all crying—"fire!—fire!" continued to run by them. From these they concealed themselves as well as they could, sometimes by standing stock-still in a doorway, sometimes by turning for an instant into the sevenfold darkness of a lane, or an open archway; and thus, by degrees, they crept, or dodged on until they were within a few yards of the bridge, to cross which would have been their nearest route to the shower of houses.

But the nearest route they did not contemplate taking. Costigan now knew quite enough of young Ned Fennell, to be assured that he would not neglect, on this occasion, to send some persons to look after him, and his youthful colleague. So, turning to the right from the bridge, the pair entered, still very stealthily, upon the beautiful walk called the canal walk, which, for a considerable distance, ran by the river's edge; and, having once thought themselves fairly free of observation here, they ran forward with a speed that could only be surpassed by that of two courier devils, despatched on a mission of great importance to Beelzebub, along the kind of black causeway, which Milton has built between his hell and earth.

Gaining the rear of some mills, a good distance from the town, they jumped upon a weir, which in a diagonal sweep allowed passage, though a slippery and unsafe one, to the opposite side of the river; and thence, it was the intention of the fugitives, to gain, by a wide detour, Joan Flaherty's house.

Costigan, still of course leading the way, had not proceeded, ankle deep, in the foam at its top, more than a few yards along the weir, when he suddenly stopped, bent and crouched down his body, and looked keenly through the darkness before him. The next instant, he turned and stopped as rapidly as was possible through the polished, slimy stones under his foot, whispering to his follower as he passed him:—

"They're lookin' fur us along this road; bud come aftther me still."

"Who's lookin' fur us?" demanded the boy, in alarm, and he too peered through the thick darkness.

Some shadowy figures certainly approached them; the foremost one, that of a woman. The young observer still looked, till fear and fancy invested this female with a face and features now never to be forgotten by him. They seemed alive too, only that the eyes were closed. He trembled, turned, tripped, and fell; and as he arose, still to follow his leader, blood was flowing from the wound on his forehead, over his haggard, young features. The persons from whom they fled were, after all, a poor, old, tottering man, his wife, equally old and feeble, and a little grandson, then returning from a begging expedition, along the well-known short cut of the weir.

As fast as they had run down the canal walk, they now ran back along it, until they were again delivered from it, into the town. And even now, they would not venture over the bridge they had before avoided. Passing it, they turned into a narrow street, making a parallel with that in which Nick M'Grath lived. Here all was comparative quiet; they could hear, however, the distant noise of voices around his house. At the end of the narrow street, they were in the very heart of the town, and in the widest part of it. To their right hand few or no persons hastening to the scene of the fire appeared coming against them; and they therefore skulked forward at that side of the way. They passed the city jail, surmounted by its court-house, both scowling sideways at it, although Costigan had, before now, made very light of its thick walls, iron doors, and black dungeons. They journeyed on, to the extremity of the town; crossed a little bridge, covering a narrow, but rapid stream, into the Irish town; now, completely unobserved, raced through it, leaving behind them on their way the fine, old cathedral with its very oddly-shaped steeple, and mysterious round tower; turned down a suburb street; gained another bridge of three arches, spanning the river, and about three quarters of a mile of that they had shunned; continued to run against its steep rise; arrived on its highest point, and stood still to breathe.

A few poor puffs of breath had not escaped them, however, when, fancying that footsteps echoed behind them, they again broke away. Not far from the other end of the bridge, a wretched by-road led immediately into Gallow Green. But, believing that pursuers were still in their rear, and gaining fast upon them, Costigan would not run the risk of misspending the half minute necessary to arrive at it. Nearer to him, to one side, off the road, a new cabin had been half erected; and at its back an old churchyard out through to allow sufficient space for its site; so that it was overtopped by an almost perpendicular bank of loose, crumbly

earth, studded—though they were only now half embedded in it—with human bones and skulls, layer over layer. After darting through the open cabin, against this bank, Robin Costigan and his apprentice began to scramble upwards. The loose, dry earth, and the poor relics of mortality, gave way under their hands and feet, and clattered about their ears; but still up they toiled, until fairly exhausted, they at length sank in a luxuriant broad-bladed, dark green grass which plumed the graves in the most populous recesses of the ancient and long neglected cemetery.

Here Costigan uttered not a word; only growling as he fell flat, and buried his face in the grass. His companion sat up, resting his back against a headstone, and gazing vacantly upon another, at only a few steps' distance.—The faintest, faintest gleam of dawn now began to move, like a changing spirit, through the deep murkiness of the November morning. As the boy continued to gaze upon the blank of the headstone, he believed that a something, a little less dark than itself, came and stood against it. Still he looked, and the blank, vague thing became by degrees the shade of that aged woman, life moving her lips, though her eyes were still shut as he had seen them on the weir, and her brow was now stained with blood. His hair stirred and erected itself on his scalp; he screamed, jumped up, and ran wildly through the churchyard. Costigan, with horrid curses, also rose and strode about in quest of him. When found, he beat with his fists his wretched pupil until the boy's flesh was black and blue, and even his conscience quieted for the moment under the influence of a new terror. In a few moments afterwards the pair were standing at Joan Flaherty's door.

CHAPTER XXI.

As soon as Ned Fennell had left the beggar-girl, the poor thing sat down on the straw which was to be her bed for the night, and laying her forehead on her knees, and closing her eyes, as if purposely to shut out all surrounding evidences of her real lot, began to indulge in bright visions of happiness and heart's ease to come; nor were the long fluttering sighs that soon escaped from her bosom, nor the stilly and dew-like tears which gently won their way through her shut lids, indicative of any interruption to this fascinating series of castle-building.

"Thackee, thackee", hearkee to me," said a whispering voice almost over her.

She looked up, and by the dim light of her greased rush saw a grey-headed woman leaning over the mud wall, fumed to us of yore.

"Come here, an' hearkee to me," continued this near neighbor.

"What is it, honest woman?" questioned the beggar-girl, standing upon the spot which the other overlooked.

"I was overhearin' your discourse just now wid Masther Nuddy Fennell; an' it's a good right you have to be afraid of Darby Cooney's hand as you call him; for Darby Cooney knows by this time that yourself and the young man were together, an' he knows you're aftther informin' on him."

"Och, och, don't say that to me, good woman, whoever you are, an' may the blessins shrew your path every day you rise."

"It's as thrue as that you're standin' on Joan Flaherty's flure. The boy—the devil's baby I mane in the shape iv a boy—that fells Darby Cooney, was on Ned Fennell's thrack whin he came here, an' he hard a'most every word ye said through the cracks in the door; I seen him wid my own two eyes."

"Och, then, pray fur my soul, honest woman, for Darby Cooney's hand will soon spill my blood, an' he'll throw the poor corpse where no eye will ever see id more, an' where no blessed sod will cover id! Och, och, what am I to sud myself from this spot!"

"You must make a bowld run for id, ma colleen, an' you must hurry too, an' you must hide yourself well from Darby Cooney's eye, or it's a thruth that all will soon be over wid you."

"An' och, och, who'll hide me, or who'll screen me from him? He'd find me out anywhere at all; oh, I'm lost an' gone fur ever."

She wrung her hands and beat her breast in despair. "Hush! hush! isn't that his step outside o' the door?"

Her friendly neighbor hastily dropped from her place on the wall into her own cabin; and the girl stood palsied with terror, straining her eyes and ears towards the door of Joan Flaherty's house.

But the new-found comforter quickly showed her head again over the top of the dividing wall, whispering:—

"It was a false alarm, ma colleen; he's not there this time."

"May the Heavens be your portion for that one little word!" cried poor Mary, clasping her hands.

"But I tell you you haven't a moment to look behind you or before you; if he comes back an' finds you there—"

"Och, you needn't tell me, you needn't tell me! I'll run the world over from him, an' I'll hide—"

• Young girl!

door, and added, broken-heartedly, "but where can I hide from Darby Cooney?"

"Lave the door half open, that he may be thinkin' id was by it you left the cabin—no—wait—don't stir till I go round to you—don't stir beyond the threshold till I bid you."

In a moment after, the beggar-girl heard this person speaking in to her from her own doorway—the thresholds of the two doors met in fact.

"Are you listenin' to me, good child?"

"Och, I am listenin'."

"When Darby Cooney comes back an' misses you, he'll look fur the thrack o' your bare feet in the puddle here, but he mustn't find id: see—make one step on this from your own door, an' another on my threshold, an' then in here with you to myself."

While delivering these instructions, she placed in the mire an upturned stool; the poor girl understood and obeyed her, and in a few seconds jumped on the floor of her compassionate and zealous neighbor, who quickly and cautiously fastened her door.

"You're too purty, colleen dhas, to let us lave you in the power of Robin Costigan—Darby Cooney, I mane—afther what has happened; an' young Ned Fennell won't keep the shet hand to them that saves you fur himself, I'm thinkin'."

"He said long, long ago, he'd give me money, an' when he does I'll give id all to you, if you'll keep me from Darby Cooney."

"Money makes the ould mare throt, good child, and if I don't get the price o' new duds from Nuddy Fennell, I haven't knowledge, that's all. Bud there's no time fur discoursin'. Come, this is the last place Darby Cooney will look for you in; he'll never think you stopped so near him. Bud we'll make sure. An' first we must hide your ould mantle; an' we must hide this gownd too; an' we must put this ould bed-gownd on you; an' we must tie this ould cap around your purty face an' your purty jaws; ay, we'll play some o' Darby Cooney's thricks on his ownself, ay, mostha, we will—bud, mother o' glory!" the woman now shrieked out, "what's this I see on your bare back and under my eyes?"

During the course of her last speech her fingers were as busy as was her tongue, stripping off the little beggar the articles of dress that she deemed for a time to oblivion; and thus Mary's neck and back became exposed.

The astonished girl demanded the cause of her sudden exclamation.

"Tell me," and she gasped out the questions, "tell me, an' tell me thruly, as there's a heaven above us! who are you? whose child are you? are you Darby Cooney's daughter? do you know yourself to be Darby Cooney's daughter?"

"Och, no, avourneen, I don't know any such thing; an' I'm shure I'm not Darby Cooney's daughter—an' the Lord forbid I was! He tells me I am not his child, every day in the year, to slow me what a burthen I'm to him; an' shure—as I said to my tender-hearted boy afore now—it's out o' the course o' natur' that I could be the child of the man that holds such a hard hand over me, an' that 'ud take my very life this blessed night wid as little murey as he would a dog's—och, no, no, no, I'm not his daughter!"

"An' whose child are ye, then? tell me, for your life!"

"Avoch, I don't know whose child I am—may the heavens pity me, I don't know."

"Do you remember anything that happened to you afore bein' wid Darby Cooney?"

"No—stop—bud no again. There was a little shade o' a notion came across my mind that moment—but it's gone away again—gone—gone—it was like a dhas o' a song beginnin' to croone in my very soul, widin'—"

Her new friend interrupted her by suddenly singing out a part of a wild, melancholy air. The girl started.

"That's the very tune," she said, "an' I'm shure I hard id afore I came to be along wid Darby Cooney."

"An' tell me another thing—do you remember bein' carried about the country on a woman's back?"

Mary again started, and her beautiful, young face glowed with intelligent anxiety, as she replied:—

"I do—for the first time, I call id to mind now—an' I am shure it was the woman that carried me on her back that used to sing the dhas o' a song—and wait a bit over again. There's another thing coming on my mind at present—the woman left me in the middle of a field one day, an' I fell asleep, I believe, an' when I woke I wasn't on the woman's back bud on a man's back; an'—"

The listener here cast her arms round Mary Cooney's neck, kissed her again and again, but was silent, for tears and sobs would not let her utter a word. At length she spoke in broken sentences.

"You're my own daughter, colleen beg, you're my own daughter! The blood o' my heart is round your heart, and I gave you the milk from my breasts! ay, ay, I'd know you for his child and mine by barely lookin' at you," she placed her hands on the girl's shoulders, and her eyes ran wistfully from one to another

of the features she gazed upon. "Ay, ay, you have his very look, fur he was handsome then, tho' he's ould an' cantankrous now. An' there's the mark an' token between your shoulders—och, yis, my own own child you are!" She again embraced the beggar girl, who warmly returned the caresses, saying:—

"Och, och! if it's the thruth that I find a mother in you, this night, the Lord above be praised fur ever!"

"I'll make you shure, I'll make you shure. Bud there's no time for spakin'—hurry into this bed now—an' now lie down—lie down—I'll cover you up—an' don't have fear—don't have fear, colleen beg—I saved Darby Cooney's own life wanst—an' Darby Cooney's bad, black blood shall make that threshold wet afore he harms one o' the shinin' hairs o' your head, my own chona-ma-ehree; lie down, lie down, an' lie quiet, quiet, an' never fear. I'll hide you, I'll hide you. Darby Cooney has his match in this cabin, to-night, and hurt shan't come near you, my colleen beg. There, you're covered up well now; and I'll hide your ould duds—"

She stepped nimbly upon her three-legged stool, and stuffed them into the thatch of her house, nearest to her hand—and, as will be recollected, that was near enough—"an' I'll fasten the door well; and I'll put out the rush; an' then let me see if ten Darby Cooneys dares to lay a finger on you. Often I see the poor, little wake hen keepin' off the bull-dog from her chickens—an' I'll keep off Darby Cooney from my chicken. Whisht! I hear somethin' like a far noise; don't as much as draw your breath loud—an' don't have fear still; I'll sit here on the stool, close by you, in the dark, an' a little mouse 'ud make a louder noise nor I'll make; bud for all that I'll watch you well; and by the soul o' my body! if a bad hand does come over you—"

She sprang up, seized the only knife in her establishment, the wooden-hafted one, and began sharpening it very cautiously, on the bars of her little grate.

"Whisht, over again!" The clang of the alarm-bell, for the fire at Nick M'Grath's house, now reached them. "That's a fire-bell, and the Lord defend your tender-hearted boy from the hurns of fire, this holy and blessed night!"

"Och, amen, amen, I say!" wailed poor Mary in her bed; "bud the fear is on my heart that Darby Cooney is the man that makes it ring out, for all that."

"Never mind, never mind, ma colleen; you will be safe from him, at any rate, while Nelly Carty's soul and body stays together."

She ran back to her stool; after puffing out her substitute for a candle, sat on it, the sharpened old knife now held tight in her right hand, and continued in a whisper:—

"Lie quieter nor ever now, colleen beg—not a stir from you—not another single word from you—and I'm not going to spake another single word myself, only I'll sit here and watch over you—watch over you."

Perfect darkness, and perfect silence now prevailed in the hovel. No stir of her person, no rustle of her garments came from Nelly Carty's stool, and her supposed new found daughter remained as stilly as herself. Hours wore away, and it was the same, except that now and then Bridget Mulrooney gave a sudden tumble and snore in her own bed, at which misther pig would also turn in his snug corner, and grunt out—"what in the world is that?" And yet another hour might have passed, and despite her mortal fears, the way-weary poor beggar-girl began to breathe hard, in overpowering slumber, when suddenly the watcher at her bedside withdrew the hand which, expressive of protection, had hitherto rested on her shoulder, and putting back with it the grey locks from her ears, prepared them to listen intently. She could not be mistaken. It was Darby Cooney's growl, though now escaping him in the lowest possible key, that sounded at Joan Flaherty's door.

"Mary!" he called, evidently with his mouth to one of the chinks of the ricketty barrier, thinking that it was secure on the inside. He kicked against the door and it flew wide open. Nelly Carty next could distinguish that he lit a fresh rush, and was searching for Mary Cooney from corner to corner of his lodgings. Next she heard a low conference between him and another person, and immediately after rays of a red light darted like golden arrows through the chinks of her own door, as, in fulfilment of her anticipations, the old robber went out to look for footprints in the mire.—There was a pause: Had he gone away? No. She heard his breathing outside her threshold—and she believed that his fall eye was scrutinizing the inside of her dwelling—or, at least, vainly endeavoring to do so, for, notwithstanding that the faint dawn began to grow more visible out of doors, little chance had it of yet becoming even hinted in the interior of one of the shower of houses; and, as will be recollected, Nelly Carty had long ago extinguished her rush-light.

He returned into Joan Flaherty's hut. Hah! was he clambering up the dividing wall, with his light, to take a more satisfactory survey of his neighbor's premises? Without the slightest noise, Nelly Carty slid from her stool, and

then, without rustling a straw of her bed, stretched herself under the tattered coverlid, as still as if she were dead. Her eyes seemed closed too, yet could she peer between their lids.

Upwards and still upwards, over the wall came the feeble beams of Costigan's rush, and she soon saw himself, or at least his head and shoulders leaning forward, while he held the light above him, and every now and then changed his position, that he might shed it by degrees upon every spot of Nelly Carty's floor. His glance fixed, and became fearfully steady on the couch occupied by Nelly Carty and poor Mary; and it seemed to his old friend that he detected the presence of a second person at her side. He was preparing to descend from the wall into her cabin. She vainly tried by a soft whisper and pressure to awaken the beggar-girl, and warn her against screaming out, or in any other way betraying herself, and was obliged to start up in a sitting posture, as Costigan's motions became more alarming.

"Who are you? and what do you want?" she demanded.

"You know well who I am—and you know well who it is that I want. I want Mary Cooney—the little girl that's in the bed with you," Mary here shrieked. "Yes, that's her purty little voice—she's calling out to come to me."

"Don't come down there, like a robber and a murderer, in the dead of the night into my house, or I'll make you rue the hour!"

"We'll thry."

Some ten years ago, Costigan would have made light of jumping from the top of the wall on the floor beneath him. At present, however, he was obliged to turn and suspend himself by the hands, from its edge, that he might allow himself to drop easily downward. While proceeding in this operation, Nelly Carty standing on her stool, and desperately gripping the haft of her old knife, was immediately at his back—nay, she had even fixed her eye upon the spot where she was to strike him. But one thought of other days, and then a rapidly succeeding dread of taking human life came upon her. Her knife fell from her hand. She did not, however remain inactive; summoning all her strength, which was by no means contemptible, she suddenly seized, ere he had dropped upon her floor, both his feet, and shoved him upwards over the wall, until he fell heavily at his own lawful side of it.

"Still have no fear, ma colleen beg!" now shouted the triumphant Nelly Carty, remaining fixed on her stool, her eyes steadfastly riveted on the place where she expected Costigan to re-appear.

In a little time, indeed, his head again began to emerge over the wall, concentrated hell blackening his seowl, and all his features.

"An' you'll thry id again, will you?" demanded Nelly Carty, baring her stalwart arms for another deed of prowess.

"Mary Cooney, my poor child—where are you, Mary Cooney?" called out the voice of a new-comer, in kindest accents, under Joan Flaherty's roof.

The poor girl, shivering and chattering in her straw, could not call to mind whose voice it was, and yet, instant relief came to her heart as it struck upon her ear. Nelly Carty did not know whose voice it was, and stood greatly amazed, and almost as much afraid of it as she was of Robin Costigan's. A third individual in the neighboring wigwam, after he heard it, and had glanced into the features of the person from whose lungs it proceeded, began to howl like a lashed hound, and crying out—"Run for id, masther—run for id!" raced out of the apartment, still howling.—Robin Costigan himself just turned his head, looked downward, and with the bellow of a wild bull, now dropped of his own accord upon the floor of his hovel, and then, to the observant ear of Nelly Carty, evidently followed the advice and the example just proposed to him.—After a second pause, the woman, from one touch of her newly come feelings, upon her very heart's pith, lost all her former dread of the accents of old Father Connell's voice, and serious and saddened, but with more respectability than had ever marked her expression during her whole wretched life before, approached Mary Cooney's bed.

"You're free ov him, colleen," she said—"Darby Cooney is gone from this neighborhood, and that bad boy wid him."

The girl started up, clapping hands for joy.

"And who made them go?" she asked.

"The good man that you hard calling out for you in the next house—the good ould priest that Masther Nuddy Fennell told you last night would help him to keep you from Darby Cooney; and he went to talk to the good ould priest about you, I'll be bound, last night, aftther quiting you, for all that you said to hinder him; and I'll guess another thing for you: the good ould priest is now looking for you, to take you home to his own house—will you go wid him, alanna?"

"Och, an' I will, surely! If 'twas nothing else, hasn't he the power, however he came by it, to frighten away Darby Cooney from me—and who else, wid Masther Nuddy Fennell's help, can hide me, and keep the hand over me,