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FATHER CONNELL; A TALE.

BY THE O'HARA FAMILY.

CHAPTER XLII.—(Continued.)

A little time after, my cousin Anty came up the step-ladder, to tell me that a man wanted to see me, outside the mill-door, an' wouldn't go away without seein' me, but for no harm, she thought, only fur somethin' very serious; fur he said there was life an' death in it—ay, twenty lives an' deaths in it. I gave her a pictur, as well as I could, of the ould robber—it wasn't him. I went to the window agin—the man I saw afore, across the river, wasn't there now—more betoken, Anty told me that the man at the mill-door cum across the weir, to ask fur me; an' after a moment's more thought on the head of it, I left Anty to watch my darlin', an' went down to meet Dinis Keegan, the wickedest comrade that Robin Costigan ever had; but I didn't find him so wicked now. A change was upon him.

Along wid all the rest that ever knew her or saw her, Moloeth had the love on his heart for my poor Mary, ever since she was a weeny child; an' the spillin' of her blood changed his heart an' mind intirely agin Robin Costigan—ay, an' agin Robin Costigan's bad ways, an' his own bad ways; an' he made a vow to quit him and them. An' larnin' from Robin that he meant to send him, an' the others that came to help him in murdering poor Mary, far away, an' stay alone himself near the spot where she was left for dead, the thought came upon Moloeth that Costigan wanted to watch her, an' be sure that not a spark of the life stayed in her, or if it did, to rise his hand to her agin; and fur this reason, he turned back from the others, to watch the ould robber, in his turn. Another thing made him curious. He saw Costigan takin' the ould lat from the Babby's head afore they parted, an' then he stole on him, where he was sittin' a one side, outtin' the ould hat into the shape of a *skil-bech's* mask, an' at this he observed him closer an' closer.

An' when Dinis Keegan come back to the river-side, he saw him standin' near the place where they had left poor Mary—but she wasn't to be seen then. An' afterwards, he saw him hidin' until people come up in the grey of the dawn, an' gathered round the bloody spot; and then he saw all about you, Master Edmund, an' the part Costigan took in it. The people dragged you to the town, and Costigan was wid them still; and still Dinis followed them an' him. When they all come into the town, great was his wonder to see his ould Master quit the crowd, and put on his skilbech's mask, in a lone, forment the jail-door; an' thin cross over to the door, an' knock at it, an' go in. But he soon larned the manin' of that turn of ould Robin's. It was well known that there was no hangman in town, so do the work that he believed would soon be ready on Gallows Green; the sheriffs were in a great pucker, fur fear they'd be forced to do it themselves; an' so, out of the ould love he bears you, Master Edmund, an' moreover, to hide himself for a little while, in the last place in the world, where people 'ud come to look for him, and fur that reason, in the best place, Robin Costigan is under one roof wid you to-night.

Many had been the interruptions on the part of Edmund and the clergyman, to this narration of Nelly Carty; and now Edmund broke out, shuddering, in exclamations of horror, not yet unmixed with fear even. He also expressed great surprise at the last circumstance mentioned by the potato-beggar.

"It is indeed very strange," said the clergyman, "but not so very unusual. To my own recollection, it has happened more than once before, that a man in a black mask has offered himself at the jail-door, as executioner for an approaching event; and after stipulating that his name should not be asked, and that to guard against public exposure, he should wear his mask till the matter was ended, his professed services have been accepted; and after the affair, and after receiving a heavy fee, he has gone abroad into the world again, no one knowing anything more about him."

The cell-door was here again opened, and Father Connell re-entered in great and agitated haste, followed by our smiling, handsome little gentleman. A small table being provided, the latter sat down to it, deliberately put on his spectacles, and drew from his pocket, pens, an ink-bottle, and very professional paper, smiling all the while most kindly and complacently. In fact, he was an attorney, a great friend of Father Connell, and he had come under the old priest's guidance to make notes from Edmund Fennell's own declarations, for a memorial to be presented to the Lord Lieutenant, praying a respite of Edmund's sentence, beyond the forty-eight hours specified by the "hanging judge" to enable the lad to establish his innocence.

The powerful additions made to Edmund's case, since Father Connell had left the prison, were now heard with great joy by the old clergyman, and with great satisfaction by the attorney. Father Connell even went so far as

to presume that they were sufficient to procure Edmund's immediate liberation, without having recourse to the memorial at all.

But the smiling solicitor shook his head. They supplied only additional reasons, he said, why the memorial should be proceeded with; they made it stronger, and greatly increased the chance of its success. Yet, strong as they were, they did not afford such legal and palpable proof of Edmund's innocence, as to authorize the local authorities not to proceed in the execution of the law's sentence. Besides, he whispered to the two clergymen, that the time was now perilously short; and accidents might happen on the road; or the Lord Lieutenant might not at once be seen. And in fact, he concluded, the attempt to murder Mary Cooney did not disprove the evidence on the trial that Edmund had murdered Helen McNear; that lady must be forthcoming in order to have the fact demonstrated, and therefore the memorial ought to be prepared, and forwarded with all despatch.

"The young lady is alive, an' I hope well," here observed Nelly Carty in a whisper to Father Connell, "one towld me as much, sence I sent Tom Naddy to look fur her; but God knows when Tom can have her to the fore; an' fur that reason, your rivinice, let the attorney begin his writin'."

Fully convinced, and now more anxious than ever, Father Connell urged his friend to complete his task. Poor Edmund observed the demur among them all, and again changed color. The attorney did not take a long time to finish his notes. Father Connell and he were then hastily leaving the cell—the former almost dragging out his methodical friend. So earnest was his hurry, that he crossed the threshold without taking leave of Edmund Fennell.

"Will you not give me your blessing, sir, before you go?" said Edmund.

Father Connell paused, and turned round. Edmund was upon his knees. He hastened to him, and assumed the same position.

"Kneel down, kneel down," he said, slowly and impressively motioning to the other clergyman, to his professional friend, and also to Nelly Carty, who remained in the most distant corner of the cell, "and kneel down," he continued to the stern-looking man who had opened the dungeon door for his departure, and who now stood upon its threshold. He was obeyed by all. He had not spoken loudly to them, but there was a patriarchal authority in his low-toned command, and so all knelt. Then he laid his hand beside him on the floor, strained his eyes upward, and stretched his arms to their full length above his head. And he prayed in the same suppressed inward voice in which he had issued his command to those around him.

"Lord of justice and of mercy, mercifully hear our humble supplications this night! If it be your holy will to take this boy out of the world, even now, in the vigor of his first youth; grant to him, we beseech thee, that he may be enabled to prepare for meeting Thee face to face—Thee his august and Heavenly judge!"

He placed the palms of his hands on Edmund's bowed head, as he continued, "the blessing of God be upon you, and with you, my child, amen;" and the *amen* echoed by those who knelt around, if not loud, was heartfelt.

Without rising from his place, the ancient priest allowed his hands to fall on the shoulders of him for whom he prayed, and he laid his cheek close to that of the sentenced prisoner. For a little while he remained silently thus, and the lookers-on could perceive that he wrestled almost till he shook, with his strong sorrow. At length he suddenly arose; three times made with his open hand the sign of the cross over his adopted son, and again caressing him cheek to cheek, whispered in his ear—

"Now God be with you, Neddy, my poor child—God be with you!" and before Edmund could command words to express his feelings, Father Connell had hastened with his professional friend to the remote outside door of the prison, commanding the turnkey, who was in attendance, to follow and open it for him.

In the mean time the head jailor, or governor of the dreary abode, appeared at Edmund's cell door.

"What is this," he asked, "long past prison hours and strangers yet in the prison? I beg your pardon, sir," he continued, turning to Edmund's confessor, "I could not mean you—you are at liberty to remain as long as he and you like with the poor young gentleman; but—come here, friend Mask!" he went on, calling through the open door up the passage which crossed it, "come here and put this stranger out of the jail."

The person addressed entered from the darkness without, like a summoned familiar—"Remove her from the cell," continued the governor, pointing Nelly Carty.

"He'll nivir do that," answered the potato-beggar—"but do you look the cell door well, Misher Jailor, an' mind what I'm goin' to say!" her directions were instantly obeyed; she flew at the man in the mask, and stuck in him like a wild cat; he struggled hard with her; but she succeeded in tearing off the dis-

guise from his face, as she shrieked out—"look at him now, an' well!—this is the man that spilt the blood by the river-side last night—blood that Master Edmund Fennell never stained his hands in—never had to do with—and that I'll prove! I'll prove!—and this is the man that thought to rob ould Nick McGrath's house a little while ago, an' thought to set it o' fire—saize him an' hold him fast Misher Jailor! hold him fast, or a near cry of his will whip him off from you, while you're not dhraming about it! he broke this jail afore now, when ye thought ye had him safe for the gallows, for stealin' Tom Hefferman's cow—ay, an' after ye thought that ye hanged him well, for stealin' the Widdy Murphy's horse! hold him fast, Misher Jailor!—good night, Robin," she added—"I'll meet you at the gallows' fut agen, please God."

CHAPTER XLIII.

Father Connell and the solicitor walked away from the prison, towards the house of the latter, the old priest holding his head very high, and claving his friend's arm, upon which he leaned, at a great rate. To many questions from his companion, he remained quite silent—in fact he did not hear them. Being however closely pressed, by repeated queries, as to the messenger he intended to send to Dublin, with the memorial, and having at length heard and understood what was demanded of him, he replied that he would take charge of it thither himself. Into the hands of no other living creature, would he intrust it. There was no other living creature loved Neddy Fennell so well, and no other could so well perform the necessary duties required by the exigencies of the case.

The attorney pondered, and came to the conclusion, that his venerable companion was right. They arrived at the attorney's house, and entered his office. Although our good-humored, and placid friend knew perfectly well that expedition was now of all things necessary, yet were his habits of systematic proceeding not to be overturned. He sat down to make a fair draft of the memorial, with all his usual precision and deliberation. He arranged his facts methodically; selected his words carefully; duly and slowly read over his rough draft, now thus amended, measured a margin on the paper for his second draft, and determined the distance that was to be observed between its lines, as if the human life at stake depended upon the technical correctness of the document.

All this while our poor Father Connell was in a fever of anxiety. His professional friend had provided him with an arm-chair, and smiling most imperturbably, requested him to occupy it. But the old man could not sit still. He would start up and pace about; glance eagerly at the slow, though sure, progress of the attorney; drop sitting for a while; again start up; try to look at some good prints, which were upon the walls of the apartment; start away from them, and more hastily than before, pace about in every direction; glance again and again at the writer at the desk, and force himself barely to suppress exclamations of impatience to be gone. But it was beyond the eleventh hour of the night, before he at length placed the important paper in the side-pocket of his jacket-coat.

"Now how do you intend to travel, Father Connell?" asked his friend.

This point had not previously occurred to our parish priest, in his thoughtful abstractions, although more important ones had. He paused a moment, and answered—"On horseback—it was on horseback he always journeyed, and he was a good horseman."

"Very true, sir; every one knows that; but I fear your sedate bay mare would find an interrupted journey of sixty Irish miles, and necessarily a hasty journey too, beyond her powers of performance."

"And I believe so," muttered Father Connell in a dilemma.

"You must take a post-chaise, sir," continued the attorney; "there is no stage-coach, nor mail-coach to set out from this town until to-morrow—a post-chaise it must be."

The old priest assented, and they parted. There were now little more than thirty-six hours left, for going to Dublin, for presenting the memorial, and for coming back; and the distance, going and coming, was one hundred and twenty long Irish miles. The inn where Father Connell should engage a post-chaise, was on his way to his own house. When he reached it, its doors were closed, and no lights to be seen in its windows. Father Connell knocked loudly; he was not answered. Again, and again, and again, the same result. He hurried into the middle of the street, and gazed eagerly towards the black windows, for a gleam of a light; no such thing was to be seen; he regained the door, and listened with bent head, to catch the sound of a footstep within the house; no such thing was to be heard. Knock, knock, knock; silence. Often and often did he pray to God to grant him patience, and to strengthen him. Nearly one whole precious hour thus wore away; and all the while, it rained heavily upon his fevered and heated body. At length, in answer to a tremendous assault of his heels upon the door, a voice was

heard speaking within, and calling on others, in no very gentle accents, to stir themselves and get up. Father Connell ceased knocking, and awaited the opening of the door. But the loud voice within ceased too; and once more there was dead silence, and the door was not opened. All the tired inmates of the inn were, in fact, in their first sound sleep of the night. Our priest had nothing for it but to go to his old work over again, which, indeed, he did, to the utmost of his strength and power.

A window was thrown up, a bitter curse flung at him, and a sleeping growling voice demanded—"Why the devil he made such a racket at that hour?"

In a tone of absolute entreaty, nay, humility, Father Connell made his business known. He was answered that no post-chaise could be had at such an unreasonable hour of the night; and the speaker wondered exceedingly, in his very heart and soul, how any one could even think of such a thing; the horses had all come home late, tired from the road; and the post boys had all gone to their homes and their beds, long ago, and it was a shame, and a "burnin'" shame, to disturb honest people, in the dead of night, in such a manner; and such a night too—cold, and blowing, and pelting rain—it was a scandalous shame.

"I beseech and pray of you, for the love of Heaven," said Father Connell, "do not refuse me—it is a matter of life and death—do not refuse, and may God reward you!"

A petitioner is seldom thought much of. He was told that he ought to be in his bed, instead of being out in the rain, on a dark piercing night, saying his prayers in the middle of the street.

"Get me a post-chaise at once, I command you!" the old man now cried out, stung perhaps by sarcasm, while he was tormented by the delay.

The speaker's tone immediately changed. Inquiry was made who wanted the vehicle? Father Connell gave his name. Many and profuse apologies followed. The speaker disappeared; in a little time, the landlord and the waiter opened the door, and a promise was given that the best post-chaise in the establishment should be at the priest's door, in a few moments.

The priest made inquiries as to the probable amount of the expenses of a journey to Dublin and back again. He learned, in reply, that, by post-chaise conveyance, they would amount nearly to twelve or thirteen pounds. He was astounded. Ever since he had become a parish-priest, indeed, during his whole long life, so large a sum, belonging to himself, had not once been in his possession. He thrust his hands into his pockets; they contained a few shillings; and he hastened home in dismay, to search the little quaint-looking old desk in his bedroom, full of sad misgivings that his quest would be fruitless.

His house-keeper, who, on his return from the country, that evening, was the first to acquaint him of the calamity that had occurred, now met him with eyes swollen and blood-shot from crying all the day and night; and her air of self-importance was quite forgotten, as (the big tears running in a continuous stream down her unfeminine face) she looked into the haggard and care-worn countenance of her old master.

"Yes, my poor Peggy," he said, endeavoring to gulp the sorrow, which, in spite of his utmost efforts, began, at this sight, to master him—"yes, my poor Peggy, you loved the boy as I loved him, and your heart is full as well as my own—" he pressed the house-keeper's rough hands in his, while, for the first time that night, the tears ran from his own old eyes, as they encountered hers. But very shortly he recovered and re-manned himself.

By his directions, the house-keeper followed him into his bedroom. Here he acquainted her with the almost established fact of Ned Fennell's innocence; and how the poor woman now again wept, but triumphantly! It had been, too, her own firm belief, all through, notwithstanding the decided opinions to the contrary, pronounced by all the comforters who had visited her during the day and night, and will she not be allowed a little egotistical exultation on that account also?

She entered fully into the spirit of the aged clergyman, regarding his present expedition; and gleams of hope began to break in upon her despairing grief. So, while the priest unlocked and searched his desk, Molly busied herself in packing up a change of attire for him; but she could barely refrain, even in his and her distress, from giving vent, while doing so, to her customary remarks on his extravagance, as she surveyed the few inner garments, most of them patched, and re-patched, which constituted his present stock. She did refrain, however, as she glanced at his changed face and shivering frame; and oh, often and often, to the end of her life afterwards, had Mrs. Molloy to bless God that she had done so, and that her whole conduct and speech had been studiously, and indeed unusually respectful to the old gentleman, on this sad eve of their parting.

Father Connell rummaged his sarcophagus. He alighted upon a parcel well wrapped up, and secured with twine. It certainly contained money, and it was, weighty too. But there

was a label upon it, in his own handwriting, which declared—

"This money belongs to the charity school—£70."

We have seen Father Connell at something like his present occupation, before now. Upon that occasion he did trespass, to the extent of a few shillings, upon a fund, over which he had willed himself to have no control; and having found some difficulty in quickly restoring the trifle then abstracted from it, he had made a solemn vow never again to be guilty of a like pecculation. So this parcel was put aside. He found another, a similar one, tied up with equal care, but it was labelled too—

"This money belongs to the poor of the parish—£17."

A third, and it announced—

"This money belongs to Mary Cooney—given to me, for her personal wants and necessities by Neddy Fennell."

The future probable lot of the poor beggar-girl struck upon his mind, and this parcel also quickly fell from his hand.

He took between his finger and thumb the ring of a very little drawer, on which was written—

"This contains my own money."

He pulled the drawer open; within it were thirteen shillings in silver, and a few half-pence.

He sighed and looked very sorrowfully at his little drawer; counted the silver over and over again; raised up and laid down the money for the school, and the money for the poor, and the money for Mary Cooney; and then he walked rapidly lengthways and crossways through his little bedchamber.

The post-chaise rattled at the outer door. He returned to his desk; a second time took up the three parcels, one after the other, a second time put them down, and bent his head almost in despair. His house-keeper had left the apartment without his observation. He now felt her ponderous hand upon his arm. She drew him to a small table to one side, and emptied thereon the stockings, in which she had stored the savings of her whole life, and addressed him—

"God help you, fur a poor fool of a man," she was going to say, but she checked herself, and proceeded in an amended form—"God help you, fur a charitable creature of a man, an' how could you have money, an' all the world dhraggin' id from you? Take that, an' use id, and spend id to save my poor warm-hearted boy—him that I'd give the blood from my veins to save, not to talk o' money; take id, in the name of God; an' may he keep you, an' guard you, an' prosper you, in your journey!"

Father Connell looked at his house-keeper in surprise and admiration. He paused; she urged him more and more.

"Peggy, Peggy," he answered, "I will take your money, then; and if you are not paid it back, Peggy, in this world—if anything should happen to me upon the road, going or returning, Peggy—it will be a store for you, multiplied ten times tenfold, in a better world. May my blessing, Peggy, and the blessing of the Lord, be with you and about you."

The stocking had contained more than Father Connell deemed necessary for his expedition. He entered on a slip of paper the exact sum he believed he should want, marking it as borrowed from Mrs. Molloy; placed this docket in his drawer, appropriated the silver the drawer held, and closed his desk.

As he descended the stairs, towards the post-chaise, Mrs. Molloy again encountered him.

"You're lookin' very sick intirely, sir," she said, "an' you're in a cowl'd thremblin';—take this from me afore you lave me."

"I will indeed, Peggy; I will indeed; and I give you my hearty thanks besides, for thinking of it; you are a good creature, Peggy; and indeed I wanted this; it is very thoughtful of you, Peggy."

The house-keeper had handed the old priest a mug of warmed spiced ale, he drank it eagerly; alas, he said the truth, when he told her he wanted it. He handed her back the mug. He gazed into her hard features; bade her farewell, reverently and affectionately; descended to the little yard; gave one look around at the old place, and up the little garden, and then stepped into his post-chaise, and after a clattering bang-to of its door, was whirled off on his journey.

An old mitten dropped from his hand, as he ascended the vehicle. When the chaise was out of sight, Mrs. Molloy took it up, kissed it, and closed her hand and fingers hard upon it; and she kept it after days, as a precious treasure, until her dying day.

CHAPTER XLIII.

After the departure of the old priest, the good-natured attorney, Nelly Carty, and the head-jailor, from the condemned cell, Edmund Fennell's spiritual friend still remained with him. It was the object and effort of this gentleman now to wean Edmund's mind from any dependence upon the favorable circumstance which had recently occurred, between him and his sentenced lot, and once more to fix his whole soul upon the prospect of confronting, within a few measured hours, his eternal judge. Th