

*A Word for
Coffey*

by

**Mazo
de la Roche**

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Title: A Word for Coffey

Date of first publication: 1926

Author: Mazo de la Roche (1879-1961)

Date first posted: Nov. 5, 2020

Date last updated: Nov. 5, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20201110

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

A WORD FOR COFFEY

By

MAZO DE LA ROCHE

ILLUSTRATED BY DUDLEY GLOYNE SUMMERS

You couldn't look at old Coffey's face without knowing that he'd lived a tough life. Then Time and the "Fear of the Wrath" drove him to a child for protection. Even after what he attempted, you'll find it hard to be anything but "easy on Coffey."

I was talking with a sea-faring man beside the harbor of St. John. He had been loading kegs of nails on to a little schooner, but he must have been his own master, for, in the middle of the afternoon, he sat down on a keg and told me the story of Bill Coffey:

Coffey was about as bad an old man as I've ever seen. You couldn't look at his face without knowing that he'd lived an awful tough life. He'd a kind of a devilish look like one of them gargoyle faces and he'd a triumphant look, too, as though he was glad of all he'd done and only wished it might have been worse.

He'd been born in Ireland, but he'd knocked all over the world since he was a little feller, and one country was no more to him than another. But I always think that him being born in Ireland accounted for the queer things he did at the last. For the Irish are a queer race and no mistake. Once they get an idea in their heads they get kind of possessed by it.

Coffey had been a splendid seaman in his day, neat, and smart, and strong as a horse. But if there was trouble on board he was certain to be in it, fighting, mutiny, bloodshed—why he'd even been on a pirate ship once in his young days. He'd bit the ear off one man, and the thumb half off another, and he'd killed a Portugee, though somehow he'd not swung for it. And as for his goings on with women—oh, well, I'm telling about his death and not his life. I just wanted to show you what sort of rum old codger he was.

It happened that I sailed with him on his last voyage. I was only about twenty then, but he was getting oldish. We'd sailed from Colon, and as we were coming out of the Gulf, we were caught on the edge of a hurricane. We

were kept mighty busy, and, in the midst of it, a great comber came along and struck Coffey and sent him flying into the sea. He was up forward at the time. Then a backwash caught him as he landed in the water, and sent him back on the ship, this time far on the starboard deck. When we got to him he was cursing enough to raise your hair but he didn't seem much hurt beyond some bruises.

But some time after, a sort of paralysis took him and he was done for as far as work was concerned. He'd taken a fancy to me, and he thought he'd like to spend the rest of his days in the house that I called home. That was a boarding-house kept by my aunt by marriage, a Mrs. McKay. She was Irish, too, and a kinder woman never lived, though she was so religious.

It did make me feel funny to come home after a voyage and find Coffey sitting up at my aunt's table in a clean white neckerchief, looking as respectable as he could with that face, and not daring to let so much as a damn out of him. My aunt was a grand cook, and he knew when he was well off. And she was glad to have him, for he kept her best room permanent, and I never let on to her what sort of a life he'd led, for he was harmless enough then, hobbling about on two canes—even to a poor widow who was still good-looking.

I never knew where he got the money to live on. He'd always talked as though it'd be the Poor House for him when he was laid off. I guessed it was some loot he'd had tucked away in a bank for years, where he could lay his hand on it when he needed it.

He was able with the help of his sticks to walk at a terrible slow pace to the dock, and there you might see him, unless it was raining cats and dogs, day in and day out, telling queer yarns to anyone that would listen to them, and looking like some battered old hulk cast up on the rocks by a storm.

Tourists liked to take pictures of him, and he'd pose for 'em with one eyebrow cocked and his chin sunk in his neckercher, looking what they called "picturesque," but if they could have heard the remarks he made about them when they'd gone! He seemed stuffed full of hate, as the hold of a privateer full of loot.

But he was always very civil and respectful to my aunt.

Then a backwash caught him as he landed in the water, and sent him back on the ship. When we got to him he was cursing enough to raise your hair, but he didn't seem much hurt beyond some bruises.

She was a fine, clear-skinned woman with a steady grey eye that could give any man look for look and put him straight in his place, if need be. He took an odd fancy to her only child, little Alfred, a boy of nine. If Alfred had been a bad young one, I could have understood it better. I'd have thought Coffey'd found an apt pupil to train in the ways of wickedness. But Alfred was as religious as his mother, with her big steady grey eyes, only he was sallow, and delicate from birth.

Sometimes Coffey would bring him along to the dock and you never saw such a queer pair of companions, Coffey rolling along like an old tub in the trough and Alfred trotting alongside, grasping hold of Coffey's stick, which was carved to represent a sea-gull's head with the beak open. He'd sit quiet as a mouse while Coffey spun a yarn, his eyes fixed on the sea with a look that used to make me wonder if he'd live to be a man. But he was a human boy in lots of ways, too, for he was desperate proud of Coffey's liking for him, and I've seen him swagger across his mother's kitchen with his hands in his pockets, fairly crowing:

"Mr. Coffey's sigly"—Alfred had adenoids and never could say the letter "k"—"and I'm sigly. We gets along fine."

When Coffey got down on his seat, it was hard for him to get up again. We used to take him by the arms and heave him into a standing position, young Alfred pushing from behind, and once we got him up on his pins, he'd stand rocking like a bent oak in the wind, till he could get up strength to navigate.

That last year he was with us I was away all winter on a long voyage, and when I got back I saw a great change in Coffey. It wasn't so much that he'd failed in body as that he'd an anxious, yearning look in the eyes that I'd never seen there before. He'd always had that triumphant look I've spoke of, as though he didn't regret anything he'd ever done.

It soon came out what the change was. The fear of death had taken hold of him. And not only death, but the terror of the hereafter. That winter had been a terrible one of cold and fog. He'd hardly had his nose out of doors,

and, sitting in the house by the fire with no one but Alfred to talk to, religion had got in its work on him. Alfred was subject to bronchitis and he was out of school all winter, and I guess the only fun he had was in talking about repentance and hell-fire with Coffey. Though he couldn't go to school, he managed to get to Sunday School, and my aunt told me how the old man would watch for him to come back, with his hairy old face pressed to the pane glaring up the street for the first sign of that little codger, and when he saw him, shouting to her—"Ship ahoy, there! Open the door for Alfred!"

And Alfred would be pretty sure to have some new horror to add to the old man's misery, and he'd spin texts off like a regular preacher, and expound the lesson of the day with his eyes shining like stars, his mother said, and Coffey shaking in his old carpet slippers.

"Well, I call it a shame," I said, "to scare the poor old sinner in his latter days like this, for it isn't as though anything on earth could save him after the way he's carried on, and all."

"Alfred can save him," said my aunt. "And you see if he doesn't."

I tried to get Coffey's thoughts into different channels but it wasn't any use.

I took him down to the dock the first fine spring day, with a grand breeze blowing off Fundy, and the gulls sailing overhead. I fetched up a few cronies he used to like to yarn and cuss with, and I filled up his pipe with my own tobacco but it wasn't any use. It was Alfred's first day at school since winter and Coffey kept muttering, to himself more than to us:

"It'll be too much for the child. . . He ain't fit for it. . . I wish he'd just run along out and come down here where he'd get the sea breeze."

And the odd thing was, Alfred did appear before very long, trotting down the wharf on his spindling little legs, and his hair flying in the wind.

"Oh, Mr. Coffey!" he says, leaning against Coffey's shoulder, "I was took bad in school, and teacher had to let me out, and Mother said I could come down here to you, where I'd get the good air. And all the way I ran I kept saying to myself"—he put his mouth to Coffey's ear and whispered. Coffey's jaw dropped and he clutched the boy to him and it seemed as though a tremor ran through him.

After that Alfred was never away from his side. They'd give each other queer secret looks, and when they were alone—and we left them together

mostly then—Alfred was always talking, talking, with his little shining white face turned up to Coffey’s grim old mug, and his two hands out on his little thin knees.

One day when there was half a gale blowing, the two had taken shelter behind a pile of bales, and when I came up behind them they didn’t hear me but went right on talking. Coffey’s gums were showing in a fearful kind of smile, and he was saying:

“Y’ know well Alfred that I’ve lived a hell of a life, and now with the fear of death and eternal punishment on me, I get no wink of slape at all. Y’ see I’m afraid to go to slape for fear the life’ll just slip out o’ me, and me not knowing it, and I’d wake up before the Judgment Seat.”

“You must just resign your soul to the Lord, Mr. Coffey,” Alfred says.

“Och, that’s just what gets me,” groaned Coffey, “for He’d have the weazand out of it in a jiffey. Alfred, you must never forget that you’re to put in a good word for old Coffey, if the time comes when we stand before the Throne together. You’ve promised me, mind. And He’d believe you even if you did lay it on a little thick about me goodness, Alfred, darlin’.”

“I’ll put in a word for you, never fear, Mr. Coffey,” pipes Alfred, eating gumdrops out of a bag Coffey’d bought him.

Tears were trickling down poor Coffey’s cheeks. “Now what would ye say, Alfred, supposin’ you an’ me—just the two of us—was stood before the Throne this minute—me all shiverin’ in me nakedness, an’ Him settin’ there ferninst us with His long white beard, an’ the eyes of Him like two searchlights—what would ye say, Alfred? Ye’d stand up for Coffey, wouldn’t ye?”

Alfred took the gumdrop out of his mouth, and stared up in the old man’s face. He spoke clear and solemn:

“I’d—I’d up an’ say to God—‘Be aisy on Coffey, God. He ain’t so bad as he looks.’”

“Good—good—” gasps Coffey. “Go on, Alfred. That’s the talk. You’re a marvel.”

“‘He ain’t so bad as he looks,’” Alfred repeats, still more solemn. “‘He’s terr’ble pious in all his goin’s and comin’s. He pays his board on the tick o’ the clock. There ain’t a whiter soul in our street—’ceptin’ me own—be aisy on him, Lord.’”

“My,” gasps Coffey. “It’s great. Say it again!”

The wind and the waves suddenly set up a great noise, and drowned the rest of their talk. I sneaked away feeling very queer. I’d like to have taken young Alfred by the scruff and given him a good shaking for what he’d done to Coffey. He was little and puny but he’d taken the manhood clean out of that hardy old rascal and filled him up with fear to the very lid.

One night I heard a shuffling noise in the passage outside my door. Someone seemed to be dragging himself along and breathing very heavy. I hopped out of bed and softly opened my door just wide enough to peek out.

There was an old man in his nightshirt in the passage, carrying a candle at such a slant that the grease was dribbling all over his hand. He shuffled along to Alfred’s door and went in. I was after him in a minute, keeping very quiet so as not to awaken the other lodgers.

He was standing over Alfred’s bed, staring down at the little shrimp, and drawing deep sighs as though his heart was heavy as lead.

I laid my hand on his arm. “What’s the trouble, Coffey?” I whispered.

“Och, I’m feared,” he says, “that the wee lad’s goin’ to get away on me.”

“Get away?” I asked. “Get away where?”

“Out of this world,” he says, with a terrible groan. “Into the next. He’s as wake as a kitten, and this life’s too much for him. Look ye, Tom, the day he gives up the ghost I give up the ghost, too, for I can’t risk facin’ the Wrath alone.”

Well, there’s no use in talking to anyone that’s as crazy as that. I led him back to his bed, and covered him up like a baby, and blew out his candle. Next morning I told my aunt that I thought she ought to get rid of him. He might set the house on fire prowling around at night, or do some mischief to little Alfred. But she said, nonsense, that he doted on the child, and there was a chance he’d leave him his money.

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” I said. “Well, if you knew where that money came from, Aunt Mary, you mightn’t want Alfred to touch it.”

“There’s no money,” she says, “so dirty that it can’t be put to a good use.”

The end came about three weeks later. Coffey, all this time, had been like a man moving in a dream. His eyes had a glazed stare and he and

Alfred were always passing that queer, secret look to and fro between them, like a bad coin they couldn't get rid of.

It was a wild sort of evening in April. The sky was flaming red, and the waves that tumbled up against the pier were as green as those jade stones you see sometimes. The gulls were flying low and crying the loudest I've ever heard. I'd just strolled down after tea to look at the weather, and I was talking to a West Indian sailor, when I saw Coffey and Alfred walking hand in hand, looking in each other's faces and smiling. Well, I thought, where is this thing going to end? And I forgot for a minute what I was saying to the West Indian. . . He was facing the harbor and suddenly his face changed and then he gave a yell.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The old man," he said. "He grabs the kid in his arms and jumps into the water."

We both started on a run to the end of the pier. It was a quiet time and there seemed no one about to help. There was no sign of Coffey or Alfred. I've never been as scared in my life. The things Coffey had said about the boy pleading for him at the Judgment Seat came back like fire in my brain, and I gibbered and shook like an idiot. Thank God, two men in a motor boat came along, and I and the West Indian got in, and a second later we saw the two rise not far off, bouncing about in the green waves like toys.

It was the West Indian that leaped out and held them up till we could get all three aboard. Coffey's arms were clasped around Alfred like a vise, and he had on the triumphant grin he'd used to wear when I first knew him. He was as dead as a door nail.

But Alfred was not dead. We had only worked with him a few minutes when he showed signs of life. When he was breathing regular I took him in my arms, wrapped in my pea-jacket, and ran with him to my aunt's house which was only a block away. We got him to bed and sent for the doctor.

Alfred lay on his little bed like a dead child. His mother was sobbing at the foot while she chafed his feet, when the doctor came in. He was a large, noble figure of a man, with a full white beard spread out on his chest, and a shining, white forehead above heavy brows and piercing blue eyes. You could almost understand how Alfred came to think he was God, but at the time, following all the other excitement, it gave my aunt and me a terrible turn.

The doctor felt his pulse and lifted his eyelid and looked in his eye. Suddenly both Alfred's eyes flew wide open and he glared up into the doctor's face. Then he doubled up his skinny little body as though he was galvanized by fear. Then he seemed to gather all the life that was in him for one big effort, and he scrambled to his knees. The blanket we had around him slid off, and there he was, stark naked, with his heart jumping against his ribs like a fish in a net. He folded his two hands as if in prayer, and he began to plead for Coffey as he'd often promised to do before the Judgment Seat.

"Please God—I want to say a word for Coffey—be aisy on him—he's not so bad as he looks—not so bad as he looks—he does be a terrible pious old feller—please wash away his sins—like you've washed away mine—and—oh. God, I'm awful cold!"

Of course, the doctor didn't know what the child meant, but he was properly startled, for he looked like a little saint, and he gabbled like one possessed. We couldn't do anything with him till the doctor made him certain that Coffey was forgiven, and washed whiter than snow.

That rascally old fellow had planned the whole thing some time before, for he'd made a will leaving all his money to my aunt, and stating that a suitable monument was to be raised and inscribed to Alfred and him.

Well, we put up a nice headstone to him, though he didn't deserve it, and my aunt was able because of the money to give up taking lodgers and live private (except for me) and send Alfred to college for a grand education. He's almost through for the ministry.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *A Word for Coffey* by Mazo de la Roche]