

SO AS BY FIRE

BY JEAN CONNOR

CHAPTER VII

TWIST LIFE AND DEATH

Mildred stood at the gate where her father had left her, looking out through the deepening shadows at a scene that was her first glimpse of the tragedy of life. Lights were beginning to twinkle down the steep, crooked streets, and in the wooded depths of the gorge where searching parties were still at work. One-half the cars had gone down under the swollen waters of the creek, and it was supposed that many of the hapless victims had been swept off by the swift current to the great river into which the smaller stream debouched scarcely a mile below.

Each train now bore anxious friends and relatives to the scene of disaster and the little mountain village, roused from its usual torpor, was all a-shred with feverish life.

Two women passed by the gate, sobbing bitterly; men were bearing a stretcher from the little cottage across the street; from the banks of the stream came the clear, quick tones of official command. Everywhere was the shock, the jar, the horror of sudden and unlooked-for calamity. To Mildred Randall it was a revelation of a world she had never known, and she looked out upon it with soft, pitying eyes, longing to help, to ease, in some way, the cruel stress and strain around her.

Suddenly, a voice out of the shadow scooped her. "I beg your pardon, miss," the speaker stepped from the clump of cedars before the gate. "They told me there was a young girl lying dead in here. Can I look at her?"

The words came hoarse and quick, and with an evident self-repression, that touched Mildred's heart, though it was a plain, awkward countryman who spoke—a very clown to the cultured circles in which Miss Randall lived and moved.

"There is a woman dead in here, yes," she answered, in a low voice of sympathy.

"Went off—about sundown—so I heard" the other continued, in the same short, broken tone. "Lord, if I had only known it! I've been searching everywhere, up and down the stream—and among—among them stiffs yonder—and—all the time she was dying here alone—God!"

There was no irreverence in the word—Mildred felt it was the cry of a breaking heart.

"Oh, it is hard, very hard," she said, softly. "Your sister, perhaps, or—wife—"

"No, ma'am; no, she wasn't, so to say, nothing like kin, I mean, nor wife—no, nor sweetheart—least not of her own will. But—but I thought a lot of her. We were sort of neighbors, you see, and she, having nobody but an old grandmother to look after her, I come on as soon as I heard of this smash-up to see if she was hurt. She don't seem to have been ticketed anywhere, though most of the people had letters or cards or something to show up who they was. Can't even locate her trunk, though the baggage car is open for inspection down that below. But I heard that was a young woman lying dead up here, and so I come up—to see—"

"You can come in, I am sure," said Mildred, impulsively. "Only I must ask you, please, to be very quiet and self-controlled. My—my cousin, who was severely injured, is in the adjoining room, and is just beginning to rally from the shock. She must be kept very quiet."

"Oh, I'll be quiet, miss, I'll be quiet. I ain't—ain't—the rapping kind. If you just let me look at her so—so—I kin take her back home. It ain't any great shakes of a home, but she'd like to be tucked back, and laid under the old yew tree there, I know."

"Come, then," said Mildred softly, and she led the way back into the little cottage, where the light in the front room burned dimly, and the window shutters were closed, and pitying hands had straightened the still, stark figure for the last sleep. The door leading into the back room was slightly ajar, and Mildred closed it cautiously before she lifted the veiling sheet from the dead face.

There was a moment's silence, then a strange, hoarse, choked sob. "Is it—?" asked Mildred, her eyes full of tender sympathy.

"No, miss, no. Lord, that ere is old enough to be Weasel's mother," was the excited answer. "They told me, them lites down yonder, that it was a girl. It's a girl I'm looking for—a girl named Weasel—I should say Barbara Graeme."

In his relief and excitement the speaker had raised his voice, the deep rustic tones penetrated the rude partition, and the half-conscious patient within opened her wide, startled eyes.

"It's all settled, my dear," said the Judge to Mildred. "The doctor will go with us, and when the president of the road learned my granddaughter was among the injured he telegraphed that his own private car would be at our disposal to-morrow morning."

"Private car!" muttered Duffy to himself grimly, as he strode out of the gate. "I've got in among the high fyers, sure enough. That was a downright nice girl, though, high fyer or not. Lord, I'm glad it wasn't Weasel lying there!" and the speaker paused in the darkness to wipe the cold beads of sweat from his brow.

"Talk about yer spook stories! That ain't nothing in them," added Duffy. "I felt just cold sure that Weasel Graeme was in that house living or dead to-night. I could have sworn I heard her call my name! But I won't give up yet. For if she was in that train, and Nick Delven said he sold her her ticket and saw her board it—if she was in that blasted train, they showed me the names of everybody that got off safe and hers wasn't there. If she was in that cussed train—"

Duffy's keen wits were not in their usual working order to night, and he had to stop to mop his brow and rub his head to see things clearly. "Why, she must be round here somewhere hurt!"

Hurt! Ah, it was a light word, Duffy knew, for what he feared. Hurt! he had been all over the little village questioning, seeking. There was but one place to look for the hurt now. And there, down in the dark gorge where the swift foaming waters swept on their springtime flood, Duffy worked all night with the rest, dragging the bed of the creek, searching among the sharp hidden rocks, the heaped debris of the drifting wreckage, the long grass and sedges of the bank for ghostly finds—abandoned sometimes almost out of human semblance. But Weasel was not among them. Duffy would have known that red gold hair even in depths of darkness like this.

Worn out with the sickening horror of the night, the searching party were resting on a stretch of grassy bank, drinking the hot coffee that had been sent down from a neighboring farmhouse, when the whistle of the morning train was heard in the distance.

"She do be coming by the river track," said one of the men. "Big bugs aboard that, I guess, that kin switch off what they please."

"It's a special," said another. "A special with the railroad president's private car. I hearn say up that at Widder Barnes that that was some grand folks down last night, looking for a lady that was pretty bad hurt in the smash. They're a-bringing her out now."

And Duffy stood up with the rest to look at this new feature in the grisly scene, where death, grimly impartial, had stricken down lowly and lofty alike. An anxious group was emerging from the little cottage on the hillside. Two men were carrying an improvised stretcher, carefully curtained from the light, doctor and nurse walked beside it, while Judge Randall, his son, and Mildred, gave unmistakable tone to the gloomy cortege.

"That's them," continued the previous speaker with a nod. "Ole man's general, or a judge or something very big, and the Widder was telling my wife that he was terrible out up. It's his granddaughter that was hurt, and when the president heard who 'twas he was drefull out up, too. Ordered off this special with his own car to take them home. Going to take doctor and nurse with 'em, and that means a wad of money, you kin bet—"

And Duffy said she heard the old man say he'd save the girl if it cost every cent he had.

A pang shot through Duffy's honest heart at the words. Ah, if he could have saved, too, saved the girl he loved, the girl who must have been swept away by the flood to depths he could not reach! And then, for the strain had been terrible even to his rude strength, he sank back against a tree and stood there strangely faint and trembling, while the stretcher was borne down the hill and lifted tenderly into the palatial car and the "special" took its winged way over roads cleared by telegraph for its unbroken night.

"Queer!" said Duffy, rousing himself with an effort, and reaching for another cup of coffee. "Queer how durned shaky I am this morning. Ef I believed them spook-raising fakirs I'd say Weasel had been a calling on me all night and had just gup up and said good-by. That ain't nothing more to be done here as I can see, so I mout as well make tracks for home and break things easy to that old woman at the Road House."

But when, pale and worn and strangely shaken still, Duffy reached the Road House late next evening with his hopeless tidings he found it deserted. The windows were closed, the door locked and barred; no answer came to knock or call. In dire perplexity he made his way to old Huldah's cabin, quarter of a mile distant.

"Ole missus done gone, sah, nobody knows whar. She druv over de cow and de hens res' day morning, and tute me to take keer ob 'em, for she was gwine away."

"Did she hear—did she know?" asked Duffy excitedly.

"Bout Miss Weasel being killed in de deers? Yes, sah, yes, dey showed her de papers and she read em through. Lord, Lord, but 'twas drefull! An' dey ain't found dat poor chile's corpse or nothing! Drown dead, dey say, in de ribber, whar she'll never come up. Lord, Lord, 'twas enuff to crack pore ole

missus' brain. Couldn't stay here nohow, I spec. Yes, she dun gone, sah. Ole miss allus mouty res'less and can't nober. She dun gone, nobody knows whar."

And Duffy could only retrace his steps through the dim forest path that led him back to the old house standing black and silent in the deepening shadows. He stood for a moment at the broken gate, looking with a wisdom born of anguish at the dreary scene, the gloomy house, the tottering porch, the darkening pines, the weed-grown wastes stretching around ruined barn and outhouse—the graves in the deep hollow under the yew.

"Poor little Weasel!" there was a hoarse sob in Duffy's low voice. "She hadn't any sort of show fast or last. She hadn't any show."

A harsh caw seemed to mock his words. There was a flutter of black wings from the roof of the porch, and Rip perched on the gate post, his wise head askew.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Duffy, startled. "You're left behind, are you, old chap? I guess I'll reclaim my right to you. Come on, then," and he took the crippled bird in his arms, where Rip, as if realizing the situation, nestled contentedly. "I'll take care of you, old partner, for—for her sake. Wal, that don't seem much but that's at machine of mine. I'll make it work, consarn it! I'll make it grind, or know the reason why."

Meanwhile, the "special" train had kept on its swift flight over mountain and river and valley, bearing Judge Randall and his party home. Resting on a silken curtained couch, whose springs and cushions deached every shock and jar, fanned by gentle breezes, every pulse-beat, watched by anxious attendants, Barbara Graeme was borne through a strange shadowy dream world to her new life.

Dimly conscious of rest, soft, luxurious rest, such as her rough young life had never known, of tender care that seemed to lift her again to her dear mother's arms and breast, of a strange delicious soothing of pain and stress and fear that held brain and heart and nerve in a charmed spell, she was swept on and on to her fate.

"I have never seen such splendid vitality in so frail and delicate a form," said Dr. Vance, as he and the Judge stood on the observation platform the first night of their journey.

"At first I dreaded the worst, I confess, but now I feel that all danger is past. Miss—Miss Kent—"

"Randall," corrected the Judge. "She will bear my—her mother's name, in future."

"Miss Randall," continued the doctor, "is rallying wonderfully after the shock. With her it was a case purely of thock, complete, nervous shock. She will feel the effects for some time, of course—indeed it may be a year or more before she entirely recovers."

"You mean she will be an invalid?" asked the Judge anxiously.

"Scarcely that, as invalidism is usually understood," was the reply. "But you must be prepared for periods of depression, nervousness, perhaps even hysteria—melancholia. There would be only a natural sequence to a terrible experience of this kind. But with her splendid vitality, as I said, all these symptoms will pass. It is quite unnecessary, I am sure, to bespeak your indulgence for them."

"Quite unnecessary," answered the Judge. "I understand fully that she will need all my care and tenderness, poor child. Through most unfortunate family differences she has been neglected too long, but now she has come into her own again—into her own."

And she is going to live—to live," said Mildred gladly, as a little later she stood in her grandfather's place on the platform, the Judge having withdrawn from the chill of the mountain air. "Oh how wonderful, how beautiful, life will seem to her!"

"I trust so," answered the doctor, who found this bright-eyed fellow-traveler most beguiling; but one can never forecast life, even under the rosiest seemings. One of the happiest creatures I ever knew was a lame boobblack."

"And one of the happiest I ever knew a blind woman," said Mildred, softly. "But that is different, of course. Sister Celestia—"

"Does it?" echoed Mildred, laughing. "I would not like to try to hide anything from her. She can read one's heart and soul."

"What a cloistered darkeyant?" said the gentleman in surprise.

"Oh, no, no!" said Mildred, quickly. "I don't mean anything like that. Sister Celestia—"

And then, as if fearing to say more he dropped her hand abruptly and was gone.

Miss Randall looked after him with a vague regret.

"Now if I were not the light, frivolous being I am, I might have impressed that man," she thought. "Impressed him seriously. I had the chance to give him a real good sermon last night and he would have listened to me. Bess Dixon would have repeated the Catechism from cover to cover. I know. But I never could preach—"

Mildred, who had her pretty head restfully, "though it does seem dreadful for a nice man like that to live in such pagan darkness."

And Miss Randall turned back into the house, all unconscious that into that pagan darkness she had sent a ray of light that would brighten into perfect day.

TO BE CONTINUED

A NARROW ESCAPE

"Yes, but, John, can't you be serious, dear. Don't you see that I'm very much in earnest, you big foolish fellow," and as little Mrs. Donovan looked up in her husband's laughing face with a quivering lip and eyes perilously near to tears, there was no doubting the truth of her words.

"All right, little woman," John Donovan said, with sudden compunction, bringing to a quick conclusion the last lively steps of an Irish jig which he had just been performing in the middle of the sanded kitchen floor. The stalwart young farmer, handsome of face, brawny of limb, merry-eyed, and kindly of tone, had ever been of such a light-hearted and easy-going disposition that his friends sometimes said of him that he would still be found dancing and singing on his death-bed.

"What is it, dearie? Sure, 'twould be the hard-hearted fellow, indeed, could refuse you anything. Tell me, Mollie, what it is that you want us to do, astoreen," he went on, in his coaxing, colloquial way, as his wife remained sad and silent.

"You know very well what it is, John," she answered, dolefully.

"That bothersome confession again?" he asked, with uplifted brows and a very dry face. "Ah, well, I'll promise you I'll think about it, little girl."

"Yes, but you always say that, though it's nearly three years now since you knelt to the priest, and to-morrow is Ascension Thursday, and the very last day for the performance of the Easter duty," his wife said, with a little sob in her voice. "And I'm getting so hopeless, so very disappointed in you, John."

His eyes rested on her pretty downcast head with a look that wavered a moment between irritation and tenderness. Suddenly at the thought of all that little Mollie, his dear wife, the friend of his mother's, his lovely children had been to him:

"A perfect woman, nobly planned, To warn, to comfort, and to command," the latter feeling gained complete sway.

"All right, little woman," he said, passing one arm affectionately about her. "Don't cry, I'm not worth crying about, my pet. And I'll do what you ask, I promise you—anything rather than see you fret."

Mollie lifted a grateful face, into which a sudden little radiance had crept like sunshine after rain.

"To-day?" she asked, eagerly. "Must it be to-day?"

She nodded decisively.

"Yes, if you want to fulfil your Easter duty for this year. To-morrow is the very last day," she said again.

"Well, I must be off to Dublin Market this morning, so it will be a bit awkward," he began.

"That is just one of the very reasons I want you to go and make your peace with God," his wife said earnestly. Having lived all her life amidst quiet country lanes and fields, such places as cities and seaports and market places were fraught in Mollie's imagination with a thousand dangers.

"Don't you know, John, that you never go away from me like that but I'm miserable all the time till you come back, fearing you'd be killed by a train or a motor car, or maybe swept into the river by some of those wild cattle being shipped off to foreign parts?"

"No fear, dearie," he laughed confidently. "I can take better care of myself than that."

"But one never knows," she went on, "what may happen, or at what moment we may be suddenly called on to appear before God. Think of all those poor people who went down in the Titanic! And of that poor young lady who was killed the other day by the motor, not a hundred yards from our gate!"

brought that strange, wonderful, beautiful feeling of new-found grace and goodness into his heart.

John Donovan was a man who, though careless in many ways, yet had been greatly beloved from boyhood upwards for his unflinching kindness and good nature towards all men.

And in even a more special way towards all women and children, whom he never failed to treat with an old-world chivalry and tenderness too often found absent in these degenerate days.

To-day, if possible, he felt more imbued than ever before with the spirit of universal kindness and goodness. A blind beggar at a street corner received from him a dounce out of all proportion to his expectations. A few moments later he might be seen helping a feeble old woman through the crowded traffic of the street, carrying her heavily loaded market-basket for her, and depositing it and her safely, amidst the old creature's voluble thanks, on the footpath on the other side.

And when, just as he turned into the railway station on his way home, his ears were suddenly assailed with the frightened cry of a tiny girl whose mother had momentarily lost her in the hurried throng of passers-by, it was John Donovan who came first to the rescue, comforting the child, and succeeding after a very short search in restoring her to her much alarmed mother.

Having done so, he turned with uplifted hat from the lady, and was about to recross the road hurriedly to the station—for his train must be very nearly due—when a startled shout from behind him brought him to a sudden standstill. Not a moment too soon either, for hardly had he time to look about him when he was struck by the side of a motor car which had crept up behind him unheeded.

Had he advanced one step further, or disregarded for a second that warning shout, he was probably no more, for the car was bound to go clean over him. As it was, he felt a sudden jar of both legs, and was barely able to throw himself free of the car ere it was brought to a stop.

In those few moments of doubt and terror, with the memory of the mangled face and form of that recent poor victim of modern rush and hurry before his eyes, his first thought was a prayer for Mollie and the little ones at home, perhaps now to be left husbandless and fatherless forever. His second was a great uplifting of his heart to God in gratitude that, if he were to be taken, it was in the state of grace and newly-shriven that he would go before his Lord and Maker.

Was it not for this very reason, indeed, that Mollie, in the providence of God, had prayed and pleaded with him so earnestly this morning? If he must be taken from her, how much better now than yesterday, on a year ago, with all his faults and sins lying heavy and unforgiven on his soul!

But he was not to be taken after all. The car, which had happily begun to slow down ere it struck him, soon came to a standstill, and John Donovan presently found himself with nothing worse than a pair of badly bruised shins and some torn and mud-bespattered clothing, the centre of a crowd of sympathisers, half of them filled with concern for his safety, the other half equally indignant and denunciatory of the reckless driving of the man who had so nearly run him down.

"'Tis the mercy of God you were not killed," one of them said, "and are you quite sure you got no bones broken?" asked one anxious onlooker.

"Quite sure," John Donovan answered with a smile. He was feeling badly bruised, and suffering from shock, yet it seemed quite natural that now, as always, he should show a happy and smiling front to all. Perhaps it was because it is always the lookers-on who see most of the game, and he himself had had hardly time to realize his great danger, when it was already over and past. But of the crowd of anxious, excited, or indignant people about him, it is safe to say that he was the one most cool and collected of them all.

"Ay, it was a pretty close shave indeed," he admitted to those who congratulated him on his narrow escape. "And I might as well have been killed, almost. Well, I suppose, I wasn't good enough to go yet awhile, boys—though, praise be to God, things might have been worse than they are with me. An' to think a body could so easily walk into a motor car like that, and go to one's grave without word or warning!"

Sure poor Mollie was right after all," he reflected inwardly; "an one can never be sure of the moment one is to be taken. It was herself or one of the children was in it now!" and a spasmodic cross his face. "It shows us how well prepared we ought to be at all times and in all places, glory be to God!"

Mollie was naturally much shocked when she heard of the danger her husband had run, even though he himself did his best to make it seem trifling and unimportant. But one good thing came of it which was to prove of vast help and consolation to her in the years to come. It was that John had been so impressed by the warning of that day that ever after he was determined—and carried out his determination—to be for ever and always, as he expressed it, ready, as far as lay in poor mortal power, to go before the Lord."

NORA TYNAN O'MAHONY.

When Hope grows strong, Worry will die a natural death.

MINISTER WHO LOVES CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Rev. Edwin E. Snell is another Congregationalist clergyman who will not stand for abuse of the Catholic Church in these days when there is in many parts of the country a recrudescence of A. P. A.-ism. Mr. Snell is a Chicago man.

Dr. Snell is not satisfied to stand with his fellow Congregationalist, Dr. Washington Gladden, against abuse of the Catholic Church. He is more like Dr. Charles E. Stowe, the son of Harriet Beecher Stowe, in a positive affection for the old religion. Dr. Snell says it is vain for any Protestant to attempt to trace primitive Christianity to any source but the Catholic Church which they call "Roman."

He loves the Catholic Church for what it has been, the transmitter from the beginning of the integrity and vitality of the Christian Gospel. He says:

"I should be a sad and vile ingrate not to love a Church that has done all that and much more for me as a Christian. For fifteen hundred years the preachers and pastors, the hymn writers and the church builders, the social reformers and the mystics, the theologians and the poets of all Europe west of Russia were Roman Catholics. All our spiritual wealth as Protestants is an inherited wealth; inherited through the Roman Catholic Church."

He loves the Catholic Church for what it is. We quote again:

"But it is not true that in some lands the Roman Church keeps its people ignorant and confirms them in their superstitions? Is it not in respect to knowledge, backward, and does it not seek to remain so? It is easy to say these things and the very fact that it is so should make us the more careful. When we have weighed the whole matter we shall probably have a more charitable judgment than we have off hand. The Roman Church deals with great masses of humanity; it must adapt its methods as wisely as it can to the capacity of the people with whom it deals. Could Protestants do any better with these same people? I doubt it."

"The Roman priest knows his people better than we know them. Few of us anywhere do as well as we ideally might. I think the priest would be as quick to acknowledge his sense of insufficient wisdom and his sorrow for it as any of us Protestants. But we must remember the task is colossal and we must pray for them rather than rail at them; we must wish them God-speed, and when we truly do we may discover that they are making more progress than now—without any prayer for them—we are likely to see."

"But it is not true that the Roman Catholic Church is an American, and is seeking to overthrow our government and all that? I hesitate not to say that I believe it is a foul and hateful calumny. The people who say these things have not one solid fact upon which to base their monstrous indictment. It is an utterly unworthy frame of mind for brethren in Christ to have towards each other. It is true, of course, that many Catholics are office-holders, and many more are office-seekers. But why shouldn't they be?"

"This is a government of the people and it is a credit, not a reproach to a citizen when he has political ambitions. If these people had less ambition, did not seek offices, did not revel in political astuteness, we should say what stout folks they are. But when they beat us at the political game we cowardly say, Oh! they are intriguing against the government."

"But every time the test comes, when there is a call for men to go to the front and die for their country, the Catholic bears his full share of the load which patriotism then assigns and triumphantly and concretely vindicates his loyalty."

"We must get this miserable slander out of our minds. By every test which can be fairly applied, the Catholic citizen stands on a par with his Protestant brethren."

"I do not say that all Catholic politicians are saints. I should not like to be compelled to defend the saint-hood of all Protestant politicians. But man for man, I will trust the ultimate patriotism of my Catholic as of my Protestant neighbor."

"I hesitate not to affirm my faith in and my affection for the Catholic Church of to-day. She is doing a vast work in the world; she has enormous responsibility resting upon her for the souls of the millions in her custody, and she is sincerely trying to bring to them the gospel of Christ, and if we are Christians we are challenged by the duty to love them sincerely. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye love one another."

"Finally then, I love the Roman Catholic Church for what she is to be. Because she is the mother church I look to see her make a place again for the children who have gone forth. I look to see her grow more gentle and more wistful when her children become less truculent. The time of our separation grows long; if we can only begin to substitute kind for harsh thoughts, if the mother can begin to grow proud of her vigorous offspring and the children grow more appreciative of the old mother, the time of a great reconciliation should not be hopelessly remote."

"If ever the world is to be won for Christ there is need of a united Christendom. At present less than one-third of the population of the earth is even nominally Christian.