

SO AS BY FIRE

BY JEAN CONNOR

CHAPTER I.

THE WEASEL.

It was March, but winter was still making a last stand on the heights, where tattered snow-banners clung to thistle and furze bush, and the wind swept down fierce and blustering, from the bare rocky steeps.

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While all around were the pines that held the Ridge for their own, the black trunked, high reaching pines that stood always the same, whispering, so it seemed to Barbara, of the tragedy and mystery that shrouded the Road House in shadow and silence.

The girl started and her head with that wild grace which was her only charm as she caught the sound of approaching wheels, and a shabby cart, driven by a stolid-faced boy, came around the turn of the road.

So Barbara stared indeed as this one drew up at her gate. "This is the place, miss," said the driver, looking back, "the close-curtained seat, and then the door of the carriage was pushed open, and a girl stepped out on the flat stone beside the road.

"Do you live here?" she asked eagerly of Barbara. "Yes," was the answer. "I am Barbara Graeme."

"My name is Kent," the stranger went on. "Elinor Kent. I am not very well, and the doctor tells me I must stop working for a while (I have been doing finishing for the factory) and come out here among the pines. They told me at the store down the road that I could get room and board here."

"Here?" Barbara burst into a laugh—an odd laugh that made Rip flutter up in alarm from his post, and perch cautiously on a distant rail.

"Why do you laugh, asked the newcomer, flushing. "Have I made such a foolish mistake? Is not this the Road House?"

question. "Who is it ye are bringing in here, ye Weasel?" It was Barbara's home name, suggestive of the atmosphere in which she had grown up, to be the lean, sharp-witted starveling she was, hungering for all that young life loves and craves.

"The lady is ill, grandmother," said Barbara. "I brought her in to get warm. Some one sent her back on a fool's errand to find room and board."

"It was at the store, the quarry store," said the stranger, as she sank trembling into the old wooden rocker that Barbara pushed toward her.

"Eh, the quarry store—yes—yes!" The old woman nodded. "It was that fool Daffy Mills. I told him that if the quarrymen wanted the attic they could come."

"The quarrymen?" gasped Barbara. "Oh, grandmother!" "Eh, and why not then?" was the fierce reply. "It will be good money and better than starving or freezing as we are nigh doing now."

"The quarrymen?" repeated the girl, indignantly. "Have we come to the quarry?" "Ay, and we are like to come to worse," answered the old woman sharply. "What harm will the men do ye, ye young fool? Ye need see nought of them."

"They are rough, coarse, drinking clowns," said Barbara, bitterly. "Grandmother," she lowered her voice, "let her come instead, if she will."

"It's no place for women," said the old crone, harshly. The stranger looked up. She had been close to fainting until now. "I—I am so sorry to have troubled you," she said. "But I had to find a place at once. The doctor said I could not stay another week in town, that I must get to these hills under the pines. He thought I would find board cheap. I can not pay very much, not more than twenty dollars for the month."

"Twenty dollars!" Barbara looked at her grandmother with startled eyes. When she had those starveling called such a sum their own? "Ye no place for women, I tell ye, Weasel," said the old woman.

"She can have my room," said Barbara, eagerly, catching the note of yielding in the sharp voice. "I will wait on her, grandmother."

Again the half-fainting guest seemed to rouse from the weakness that dazed her. "I would not ask much," she said. "I take only milk and eggs, and sometimes a little broth."

"It must be paid in advance," said the old woman, gruffly. "Yes, of course. If you will only let me stay! I am not able to look any further. It will only be for a month. After that," the speaker's pale face brightened, "if the doctor thinks best I will go to Colorado or California, or perhaps the south of France."

California! Colorado! The south of France—and yet she was willing to stay at the Road House! Barbara stared at the frail, pitiful figure leaning back in the old chair, and wondered at their guest were quite right in her mind. But if it were to keep off the quarrymen with their rude jests and coarse laughter, she felt she could bear even that.

"But—but—" Elinor Kent's gaze turned again to the picture. "Why, then, do you have that?" "Oh, ha!" said Barbara, with a little laugh. "I found it upstairs ever so long ago, when I was just a kid. I don't remember my own mother, and I used to make believe it was her picture, though it isn't of course."

"Of course," assented Elinor, with a smile. "It's the Blessed Virgin—" "Is it?" asked Barbara, staring. "How do you know?"

"Why, why—" Elinor's own eyes widened in wonder—"don't—don't you know, too?" "No," answered Barbara. "I never knew who it was. I liked the face—it is so kind, so beautiful, like the mother I used to dream of sometimes when I was little and I never had any one but grand-mother, who was old and cross. So I put the picture there, to bring back my dreams. But they don't come any more," Barbara added with her little hard laugh. "I'm too old for them now."

"Ah, that's a pity!" said Elinor, softly. "Oh, I don't know," was the careless answer. "What's the good of dreams? You just wake up and find they're not true."

Elinor was silent. There seemed a gulf between her and this strange girl which she had not strength to cross. For Barbara, as she soon found was a young pagan, pure and simple; as much of a pagan as if she had lived before the Star of Bethlehem rose on the sin-darkened world. She had been taught to read and write by her old grandmother, but this was all. Her own mind, keen, restless, wonderfully active, had done its own searching, its own garnering of fact and fancy, falsehood and truth. There were books in the Road House, a wagonload of them, flung in dust and disorder up in the old attic, and Barbara had read what and how she pleased.

Into this strange, hard, lonely, unlovely young life Elinor Kent came, frail, gentle, helpless—waking herself to a new life and interest. She held to her word. Grandmother might mutter and mumble as she would, but Barbara waited on the guest as she had promised. Elinor's room was aired and sunned, the fire in the brick chimney-place burned cheerily, though Barbara had sometimes to wrench the old rotten timbers from ruined barn and out-house to keep it ablaze. The nests behind the house were watched for the new-laid eggs, and Barbara herself milked the old dun cow that had drawn scanty sustenance all winter from the dry grass in the hollow.

And Elinor, who was a gentle, kindly little creature, who had walked feebly along life's weary way, soon learned to cling to Barbara as the weak ones cling to the strong. "You are too good to me, Bobby, dear," she said gratefully, as Barbara brought up the rich, frothing milk to the window, where the pale invalid sat in the brightening sun.

"Too good! Not a bit you are paying for it," answered Barbara, bluntly. "Oh, no! I couldn't pay for what you give me," was the earnest answer. "Not yet—though some day, some day, Bobby, I can."

"Oh, you needn't—we're square," said Barbara, with her little hard laugh. "But I will, I will," Elinor went on eagerly. "I can never forget you, Bobby. When grandfather sends for me I will send for you."

"Won't that be crowding things rather for the old gentleman?" asked Barbara, lightly. "Oh, no, no," Elinor went on, the hectic flush brightening on her transparent cheek. "He will do anything I ask, I am quite sure. For you know, Bobby," and then for the twentieth time the sick girl began to discuss, with feverish delight, the story of her hopes, the radiant hopes that were sustaining her in face of disappointment, disease and death. Her mother, whose maiden name was Elinor Randall, had made a poor music teacher, Maurice Kent, far beneath her in birth and position. For a while Judge Randall, a proud, old aristocrat, whose family had held enviable rank in his native state since the days of the Calverts, had refused to receive or forgive the young lovers, being especially indignant at the husband, whom he felt had abused his privileges as a teacher by secretly winning the affections of a pupil scarcely seventeen.

But when within a year of the marriage the young wife died in giving birth to a little daughter, the grandfather had softened with grief and remorse, and offered to take the child and bring it up as his own, giving the little Elinor her mother's name and place. This the father, sore and bitter in his own grief, refused. Harsh words passed between the two, and the breach widened instead of closed.

Maurice Kent took his child to his own people, and she grew up in their humble sphere. Life was a struggle with her father always, and at an early age she had to begin to earn her own bread, knowing little of her mother's family and never having seen any of its members.

The grandmother who had brought up the young Elinor died when she was only ten. The aunt who, for a while, took her mother's place, married and went to live in Germany. Maurice Kent and his daughter were left to make their way alone, through a world in which the musician, disappointed and unsuccessful in all things, had neither friends

nor place. Elinor, a shiffling needle-woman, had been able to get work in the finer lines of factories, while her father took minor parts in orchestras or taught when he could at cheapest rates.

Six months before he had died, after a few weeks' illness, and realizing at the end the cruel mistakes of his life, he had written to Judge Randall, giving to him the daughter he had asked for eighteen years before, and begging him to care for and protect his dead Elinor's child.

On this letter, written five months previous, and unanswered still, the frail invalid, fading hourly away in the Road House, was building airy castles of hope and joy that Barbara had not the heart to shake with a doubting word. For the little "Weasel" of the Road House had grown up in the loveless darkness, where one learns to doubt and fear and distrust, and only the new pity she felt for Elinor's weakness made her patient with what she thought were a few more days.

"I will hear from them soon now, Bobby I am sure. Perhaps the letter has miscarried, or grandfather may have been away from home. In Europe, maybe. Oh, how lovely it will be to travel with him, Bobby! The doctor said a sea voyage would do me good. But I think, when I get to Roserocroft I will never want to leave it. Papa told me about it at the last, when he was ill and I was so broken-hearted at being left alone. Then he talked to me about the lovely home I would have when he was gone. The Randalls have lived there for two hundred years, and there are great oaks all around the house, and lawns like green velvet, and roses everywhere. Oh, Bobby, I do love roses, and I never had a handful of them in my all life. Did you?"

"Never," answered Barbara, grimly. "And inside, the rooms are all wide and high, with big windows that look far away down to the shining river. Papa said my poor young mama seemed to be dreaming of that river, when she died. And there is a great wide hall hung with pictures, old, old portraits—men with curls and ruffs about their necks, and my grandmothers and great-grandmothers with their high puffed hair and queer gowns, and every-body, back to Sir Roger Randall, who lost his head for the King! Such proud, great people papa said—but mama left all for love of him."

Barbara was silent. She had her own opinion of mama's folly, but kept it wisely to herself. "But now I will have her place, as papa told me. It has never been taken, for she was the only daughter, and though uncle Gilbert married, his wife never could be the same to grandmama as mama. I will have beautiful rooms that will have been closed since she left home. No one had the heart to use them, for no one had been fitted up for her. Oh, Bobby! I just lie awake at night thinking of it all, it makes me forget the pain in my breast, and—and—" the speaker was stopped by a fit of coughing.

"There, now, you've been talking too much!" said Barbara, sharply, for she saw that the handkerchief Elinor pressed to her lips was stained deep with blood, and there was a coarse creak at the window as Rip, who had been spying his mistress from the sill without, with a flap of black wings fluttered away.

TO BE CONTINUED

SISTER MADELINE

Clang! Clang! Clang! A pause of a few moments duration.

"It was the Mother-Superior's bell, the bell rung to summon her by the portress when she was in a distant part of the convent, a bell treated with great respect, decorously and solemnly rung once only when Sister Martha, who alone controlled its ringings, thought it necessary to send for the Reverend Mother, if she were not in her room.

A certain etiquette was always observed upon these occasions: young novices, wearing their black serge lodge quickly, rang the electric bell by its side and waited patiently until she opened the grille and inquired your pleasure. You might have to wait some minutes, for it was possible, nay, probable, that Sister Martha, the portress, was engaged in conversation with the priest's housekeeper, who lived across the road, on the delinquencies of the fishmonger, and it could hardly be expected that she would immediately turn from the consideration of matters of such high import to attend to you and your wants. To resume. The shutter being at length deliberately opened you asked politely if it were quite convenient for you to see the superior, and if it were agreeable to her and to Sister Martha, the portress acquiesced, and if the Reverend Mother were not in her room rang her bell once only and ushered you into the parlor to await her arrival.

It is difficult to convey to the lay mind or to those uninitiated in the new postulant gave Sister Martha and all the rest of the community who heard of her conduct, when one morning, in a furious passion, she rushed to the portress's lodge, which was unlawfully empty for the moment, burst in, seized the big bell and rang it violently as above described.

When a door opened at the other end of the cloister and the Reverend Mother appeared, the postulant darted through the lodge and rushed to meet her, her eyes flashing fire, her cheeks aflame and her head high

in the air. "Reverend Mother, I can't possibly stand it any longer. I must go home at once, this very day. I will not submit to such treatment from anyone."

"Oh, it is you, is it Sister Madeleine! I thought at the very least the convent was on fire. Come into my room, my dear child, and tell me all about it. The boat-train does not leave until this evening, so there is plenty of time to discuss it. Now what is the matter?" said the Reverend Mother, in the soft, gentle voice that was one of her charms.

Sister Madeleine followed the Superior into her room, taking the chair indicated, which stood on the opposite side of the Reverend Mother's desk, facing her and facing also a life-sized engraving of Correggio's Ecce Homo.

"I was giving little Olive a music lesson and she was so maddeningly tiresome and so stupid that I could do nothing but with her, and when I returned to Sister Vincent she took the child's part and said it was my fault and my impatient temper."

"Did Sister Vincent say that before Olive?" asked the Reverend Mother. "Oh, no, of course not, dear Mother; she said it to me privately and I will not put up with it. A saint in heaven would not stand with it, and I am not a saint."

"No, not yet," said the Reverend Mother quietly. "never shall be one, I am too human." "All saints were human beings, they were not angels. And so you wish to leave us to-day? Well, just look at that picture for a minute or two while I look out your trains for you."

There was a long silence, the trains took some time to look out, and presently a low, sobbing sound fell on the Reverend Mother's ears and she knew there would be no passenger to England that little while a very poignant postulant left the parlor to go and adjust matters with Sister Vincent, the novice mistress.

Sister Madeleine, who was dressed in a plain black dress, with a little black cape over her shoulders and a black gauze veil over her auburn hair, had been in the novitiate about three months, and about once a fortnight an explosion of this kind occurred in a minor degree than on the present occasion, which was to England, Sister Martha, who was highly indignant at such a breach of discipline as the invasion of her domain, and all the more so as it was against the rule for her to have left it untenanted, was of opinion that the sooner such termagants as Sister Madeleine left the convent the better; the novice mistress was very doubtful if they would ever be able to keep such a passionate subject; the Reverend Mother had no doubt on the matter at all, but all she said was, "We will give her another fortnight."

In due course Sister Madeleine got the habit, the postulantship, which frequently lasted only three months, had in her case been prolonged to nine, and then she was clothed, to her great joy. The novitiate, which lasted two years in this order, was not all sunshine, there were dull and stormy days as well as bright, sunny ones. Sister Vincent and Sister Madeleine were not congenial spirits and never would be, and the Reverend Mother, in whose hands was a postulantship, Sister Madeleine had little to do with her, and upon those occasions when she had to interfere treated her either with severity, which the novice bore with exemplary humility, or else behaved to her with indifference, which Sister Madeleine found much harder to endure.

"When I first came Reverend Mother was so patient with me, now she seems to have grown so tired of me and my troubles, and I can hardly wonder at it, for there never was such a troublesome novice as I have been. I know," complained Sister Madeleine one day to her confessor, who counselled her to bear the change in the Reverend Mother's manner patiently and not to resent it in any way, but to try and believe that it was for her good. So Sister Madeleine persevered and in due course the two years drew to a close surprisingly quickly, and the day for her profession was fixed.

Her father, who up till now had made her an allowance, had promised that when she made her profession he would send her a check for her dowry, but as he felt certain that she would never remain he refused to do this until the day for her profession was actually fixed.

It was not a rich order that she was joining, and one of the rules was no choir-Sister could be received without a dowry. A few days before Sister Madeleine's profession the Reverend Mother sent for her, and when the novice entered the parlor she saw by her Superior's grave manner that when she made her profession he would send her a check for her dowry, but as he felt certain that she would never remain he refused to do this until the day for her profession was actually fixed.

choir-subjects without dowry, he will not oppose you. What reply do you wish me to make?"

The Reverend Mother spoke in a matter of fact tone, purposely excluding all expression of sympathy or regret from her voice or manner, and Sister Madeleine, whose heart was almost breaking at the terrible dis-appointment this meant to her, the dream of her life shattered just as it seemed within her grasp, struggled hard to control her feelings, and to hide the anger and mortification her father's letter had roused within her.

There was a deep silence for some minutes, and then the Reverend Mother asked again in the same toneless voice: "What answer shall I make him?" "Let me stay as a lay-Sister," whispered Sister Madeleine.

"You are not strong enough, you would break down at the end of the month if not sooner. No, I cannot do that."

Then Sister Madeleine, wounded to the quick by the Reverend Mother's coldness, far more than by her disappointment, bitter as that was, burst into a fit of tears, sobbing quietly as if she would never stop, her head bent forward on the Reverend Mother's desk.

After a minute or two she felt herself lifted up and the Reverend Mother's arms around her. "And so you really thought I was going to send you away, my best novice on the eve of her profession? No, we can do something better than that. It is true we do not receive choir-subjects without a dowry, but it is also true that we have a rich benefactor to whom I can apply in certain cases and he will supply the necessary sum. I am going to appeal to him in your case and no one will know anything about it except you and me and your father and this friend, and even you will not know who your benefactor is. I can spare you. Now go to the chapel until you have quite recovered, while I write to your father and tell him what we have decided to do."

Clang! Clang! Clang! again. Seven years had passed since the new postulant rang the Reverend Mother's bell so angrily; meanwhile the Associations' Law had been passed in France, and this convent, among many others, was threatened with dissolution. Already the nuns had had notice to leave the country, but having an influential friend in the government they had appealed against it, and were still living in the hope that they might, after all, be allowed to remain and carry on unmolested, the good work in which they had been engaged for so many years. It was a time of terrible anxiety, for at any moment the government might elect to enforce the notice which had already been served upon them, and confiscate their property and drive them into exile.

Should this actually happen they had already made arrangements to go to England, but most of the community were French and they hoped and prayed night and day that they might be left in peace in sunny France.

On All Saints Day the High Mass was at 9; it was just over, and taking advantage of the holiday from servile work, most of the nuns were in the chapel praying that they might not be molested, when suddenly the Reverend Mother's bell was heard pealing furiously.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Bang! Bang! Bang! It was loud enough to wake the soundest sleeper, if anyone had been asleep. The startled nuns guessed immediately what had happened and all rushed out of the chapel after the Reverend Mother, who in response to her bell, hastened to the portress's lodge to see what was going on.

Standing at attention inside the hall, lining the cloister on both sides, was a company of soldiers with loaded rifles, and in the middle of the path was a sergeant ringing the Reverend Mother's bell violently. He was an evil-looking man with a horrible expression, as drawing a paper from his pocket he advanced to meet the Reverend Mother, as she with great dignity approached the portress's lodge, and said insolently to her in French: "Now, Madame, will you and your companions be good enough to evacuate these premises, which are the property of the French Government, within half an hour, or my soldiers will be only too happy to assist you. Kindly hand me the keys to the sacristy and the chapel, all the plate and valuables there are confiscated. Lock sharp, please. My time is valuable."

The Reverend Mother turned to the trembling nuns behind her with dignity and said: "Go back to the chapel, my Sisters, and pray for our persecutors until the carriages arrive to take us to the station. Sister Madeleine, come with me, please. You are the sacristan."

and don't keep any back." The Reverend Mother quietly and with no haste opened a drawer in her desk and took out a bunch of keys, all of which were labelled, and handed them over in silence to the sergeant.

"Is this all?" he demanded. "Yes. There are no other keys, are there, Sister Madeleine?" said the Reverend Mother. "None except the key to the tabernacle. That is in my charge as Sister Sacristan and will remain there," said Sister Madeleine.

"I think not, Mademoiselle. Hand it over at once," said the sergeant. "I will die first," said Sister Madeleine.

"There is no question of dying, my pretty Sister, but unless you hand me over that key with the others I will call in two of my men and have you taken to prison."

Sister Madeleine laughed scornfully. "Arrest me, then. I shall be only too proud to go to prison on such a charge."

"Madame! this young nun is under obedience to you, I believe. Command her to give me that key," said the sergeant.

The Reverend Mother looked at Sister Madeleine's beautiful face and trembled at the idea of her being handed over to the mercy of these ruffian soldiers, and for a moment she hesitated, but Sister Madeleine saw the hesitation and guessed its cause.

"Do not command me to give it up, dear Mother, for if you do I must disobey you for the first time in my life."

"You hear what the Sister says," said the Superior, turning to the man. "He, furious with rage, made some impudent remark to the Reverend Mother which brought the red blood to her pale cheeks. She turned and looked at the picture of Ecce Homo, and was silent.

Sister Madeleine did not look in that direction, she looked at the sergeant, a look in which was concentrated the contempt she felt.

You coward, you poor miserable coward, you are a disgrace to the French uniform, insulting a defenceless woman, and that a Religious, old enough to be your mother."

The sergeant whistled for a guard to arrest Sister Madeleine, and as two private soldiers entered the parlor he exclaimed, "Arrest that woman." "One moment," said another voice, and the nuns looking up saw a French officer standing on the threshold. "Sergeant you have grossly exceeded your instructions. I heard your insulting language to this lady. You are under arrest. Guard! march the sergeant back to the barracks. I will attend to this matter myself. Madame la Supérieure, I congratulate you on having so brave an assistant; I regret that I am bound to see that you leave without any delay, but I will see that you are treated with every consideration within my power."

HOME RULE

IRELAND: HER PEOPLE AND HER IDEALS—SUBJECT TO TYRANNICAL OPPRESSION—FAITH SUSTAINED THEM—

Looking back to the misty dawn of over seven hundred years ago, we behold a proud, liberty loving people subjected to tyrannical oppression—the Irish. The wrongs and indignations of other nations, when compared to those the Irish were forced to undergo lose all their importance and dwindle into insignificance. Unparalleled they stand chronicled on the annals of history for endurance of the oppressor's wrongs and the proud man's contumely. The equal and misery characteristic of the land—the result of English misrule—was incredible. Here we have a country that came forth beautiful from the hands of the Almighty, but was cursed and blighted by the hand of man. The negro, torn from his home in Africa and brought to shores where he was subjected to the brutal lash of the cruel whip, when compared with the cruel lot of Erin's sons and daughters, at least possessed some measure of comfort and a pronounced zest for life; the Indian in his wretched and miserable state enjoyed pleasures palatial, but for the Irishman there was not one ray of sunshine, not one gleam of light. The only avenue open to him was to woefully struggle on, hoping against hope, until either the gaunt spectre of famine stalked through the land, or the sabre of the cruel emissaries of their oppressors released them from terrestrial pain and permitted them to enter a land where sorrow does not reign or misery dwell. However, it is to their credit that with stoical calmness they bore the brunt of diabolical oppression.

One thing alone sustained them—their faith. During the dark days of their thralldom their faith, which,

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