

SO AS BY FIRE

BY JEAN CONNOR

CHAPTER III

CALLED HOME

The three days' mission at the Graystone quarry had been a success. There was neither priest nor church within twenty five miles, and men and women had crowded eagerly to the good missionary's feet. He would have been glad to have lengthened his stay, but "fields white with the harvest" called this earnest laborer on. Father Lane knelt for a few moments at the foot of the little portable altar that had been erected in the bare stretches of "Union Hall," while his congregation passed out after the evening service, which he had wisely arranged so as to catch the quarry men before they scattered to their sometimes distant homes for the night. As he arose from his knees he noticed a girl waiting at the open door, a girl whose coarse clothing showed no touch of the tawdry flattery common to her class. She had pushed a faded sunbonnet back from her face and was staring with evident surprise at the altar and tapers and cross, that for a time sanctified the poor bare hall.

"You're—you're the preacher, I guess," she said, stepping forward to meet him.

"I am Father Lane," he answered, and the kind smile on the worn face was reassuring to the questioner. "Is there anything I can do for you, my child?"

"There is a girl at our house very sick—dying, I think. Will you come see her?"

"Certainly," was the prompt answer. "Is she a Catholic?"

"Yes," answered Barbara.

"Is it very far?" asked Father Lane.

"About a mile across the short cut. I'll show you the way, that is, if you think you can help her any. She said you could help her to die. It's hard on her, you see—and she is afraid," explained Barbara, who felt oddly shy and abashed under the grave eyes fixed upon her so kindly.

"Poor child, poor child!" Father Lane consulted an old silver watch he took from his pocket. "It is right then to go at once. Sit down here on the steps and wait for me. I will be ready in a few moments."

Barbara sat down on a bench, under the disapproving eyes of the general manager of the temporary chapel.

"Shure, Father, an' it's not—not on a sick call ye are going wid her?" exclaimed Barney, as he saw the priest making his preparations.

"Yes—why not? There is a poor girl dying at her house who is asking for a priest—"

"At her house!" repeated Barney in dismay. "The Road House! What call has any Christian to be dying there? It's black days here, and the Graemes have been always—ay and worse—"

"I only know that I have been called to a dying bed," interrupted Father Lane, "and that is all a priest asks. That girl is not deceiving me, I am sure."

"Shure, I can't say anything against Wensel Graeme," said Barney, "but the old grandmother is as fierce as a mountain wildcat. She has been half mad, the people say, since that boy of hers, Buck Graeme, as they call him—"

"Never mind the family history now, Barney," interrupted Father Lane gently. "I must go at once so as to return in time to hear confessions. It is my last night here and every moment is precious."

And the speaker hurried back to the steps where Barbara sat awaiting him.

"I am ready now, my child. Take the shortest road, for we have no time to lose."

Like one roused from a dream the girl sprang to her feet at his bidding, and led the way, striking at once into a forest path, where the last rays of sunset streamed through interlacing boughs, bare, indeed, as yet, but tremulous with springtime promise.

A few brief questions drew from Barbara her relations with the sick girl, who from her far home in the Northwest had drifted down to these mountain ridges, in a pitiful search for health.

"She is expecting her mother's folk to send for her, but they won't, I know."

And Father Lane wondered a little at the tone, it was so cold and hard; wondered more at the young face, that showed already traces of strength and will strange to a girl of eighteen.

"Here is our place," said his guide as the forest path opened into the wide, weed-grown road, and the half-ruined old house rose black against the sunset.

"You mustn't mind if grandmother is cross. She's that way to everybody."

But happily for Father Lane's welcome the old woman was out. She had gone off as she sometimes did without any notice, leaving old black Huldah.

"An' brefs de Lord you's come, chile," said old Huldah. "Dat poor young critter is monstrous bad; he's been a crying and praying for you to come back."

And then while Father Lane, who had followed his guide into the black raftered kitchen, pitifully noted the forbidding gloom that darkened this young life, Barbara ran upstairs to prepare Elinor for his coming.

"Oh, Bobby, I am so glad, so glad," and the dying girl flung her feeble arms about Barbara's neck. "I am

dying. I know—you know it too, Bobby. God bless you for bringing me comfort and help."

"I will see her alone, my child," Father Lane said, and Barbara sat out on the broken step of the old porch, wondering, while the last red glow in the west faded, the shadows deepened under the pines, and the twilight came on with one bright star, for which Elinor watched every evening, shining through a break in the trees.

Rip fluttered from the rail of the porch to his mistress' knees, and Barbara stroked his broken wing softly.

"Fritzie Wonn wants to make you talk, Rip, but we won't have it will we? You're better as you are. There's no use in talking, or thinking, or—grieving Rip. It's better just to be an old black crow."

"Well, well, you have an odd pet, indeed!" said a kindly voice as Father Lane stepped out on the porch beside her. "How did you tame the rascal?"

"He is not tamed," answered Barbara. "He is just broken-winged."

"Ah, that's different," said the priest, smiling. "A great many of us are tame only because we are broken-winged."

"How is she?" asked Barbara abruptly. "Have you helped her any?"

"Yes," he answered gravely. "I think I have. I wish I could come to see her again, but it is impossible. I leave Graystone early to-morrow morning. And if—I really forget the poor child's name—"

"Elinor," said Barbara, who had risen, and still holding Rip was looking up at the speaker eagerly.

"Elinor Kent."

"If she continues ill I think it will be well to send her to the Sisters' Hospital at A—, where she will receive every care, temporal and spiritual. I have left her a card which will gain her admittance there whenever she wishes to go. And now I must thank you for coming for me, and say good evening."

"I'll show you the way back," said Barbara.

"No need, no need," was the cheering answer. "I have been among the Indians long enough to learn how to follow any trail I once have trodden, and your little wood path is well marked. Stay with your friend and may God bless you, my child—may God bless you," Father Lane repeated earnestly, as he shook Barbara's hand in a warm, friendly grasp, and turned away into the deepening shadows.

For a moment the girl stood watching the disappearing figure, while these last words echoed like strange music in her ear. She had been cursed many a time, but never—never in all her dreary remembrance, had Barbara Graeme been blessed.

Then shaking Rip from her arm she went on upstairs to the room where Elinor lay white and still, watching the star shining in her window through the gap in the pines.

"Bobby dear," she whispered, "I am so happy, so happy! I have been so careless, so forgetful. And now—now—oh, I can't talk just yet, Bobby. Just sit down here near me and let me hold your hand."

And awed, she knew not why, by this strange quiet, Barbara sat down by the bed and held the little chill hand, while night came on, and the stillness deepened, and the white star shone brighter for the darkness that shrouded the old Road House in such hopeless gloom.

Elinor lay calm and still but very weak. So weak that Barbara had to bend close to catch her whispers.

"I am not afraid now, Bobby—not afraid. Father Lane said I must not be—that God was so good, and life had been so hard. I—I—couldn't tell him much about Rosecrofte, you see, but oh, Bobby, I feel the letter is coming soon now—very, very soon. I'll never have to go to the hospital, Bobby. The letter will come calling me home."

"Of course it will," said Barbara sturdily. "It can't be very long now."

"An' I'll be so good when I get home, Bobby. I'll never be careless or forgetful again. It will be so easy to be good there. I won't have to work, you know—work when I am cold and sick and faint. I will get well and strong, won't I, Bobby dear?"

"So well and strong you'll forget you were ever sick, I guess," said Barbara, with a queer forced little laugh.

"Oh, no, no! I won't forget—I'll remember it always, and—and it will only make me happier—and I'll remember you, Bobby—and—and make you happy, too, if I can."

"There, now, don't talk any more," Barbara's voice was a bit husky as she spoke. "Go to sleep and dream about it all."

"I will," whispered Elinor faintly.

"Oh, Bobby, just think of living among trees and flowers—it will be summer-time when I get there, you know—all kinds of flowers—and the river! It seems as if I could hear the river now."

"No, you don't," said Barbara with sudden sharpness. "It's only the wind in the pines—"

And then the cruel fit of coughing came on and Barbara lifted the struggling girl in her arms while she grasped for breath and life.

And so between hope and fear the battle with death waged on through the long hours of darkness, old Huldah coming up ever and anon with draughts of warm milk and bottles of hot water—a croaking, dismal presence on the gloomy scene.

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"Oh, Bobby, I am so glad, so glad," and the dying girl flung her feeble arms about Barbara's neck. "I am

a-gwine fast. De deaf pinch is on her face now. Don't you go breathing her breath, chile, or 'twill catch you next, and you'll be dead befo de change, ob de moon."

Yet when the morning came on flushed and dewy with hope and light, Elinor lay back on her pillow wan and weak indeed from the struggle, but the young life within her unvanquished still.

Leaving her sleeping in old Huldah's care, Barbara, white and worn and shaken by the vigil of the night, stepped out on the porch for a breath of the glad morning air. As she stood leaning against the old rotten pillar, like the frail, blighted blossom of this ill-omened roof-tree that she was, the clatter of horse's hoofs came swiftly down the road.

"Daffy!" she cried, startled, and the eager lover of the previous day drew rein at her gate.

"Here it is!" he said, waving a white envelope. "It came by the first mail, and as I was going to town I came to bring it to you, Wesel. Here is the letter you have been looking for so long for Miss Elinor Kent. Good luck to you with it," added Daffy, showing his white teeth in the pleasant smile that was his only attraction, and tossing the letter over the gate he galloped on.

Barbara sprang to pick it up. The letter indeed! Stained and travel-worn and stamped with a dozen postmarks that told of its wanderings. The long watched-for, hoped-for, prayed-for letter—the letter that called the dying Elinor home!

A great tremulous wave of joy surged over Barbara's heart, warming and stirring its chilled pulses as they had never been warmed and stirred before. She bounded into the dark hall, up the stairs, and then paused, suddenly conscious that her news might startle Elinor too rudely. But hesitation was useless.

"I heard, I heard!" cried the sick girl, in sharp, tremulous tones. "The letter has come! Give it to me, Bobby, give it to me." And she started up on her pillow with feverish strength, and tore open the envelope.

"My dear, dear child, my Elinor's child," she began. "Oh, it is from grandfather, from grandfather!" she said, breaking off rapturously.

"Thank God, thank God. At last, at last, Bobby!" Then the glad tone suddenly grew sharp and strained.

"It has all turned black. I—I can't see! Read it for me, read quick—oh, my God, my God! Bobby caught the struggling, sinking figure in her arms, while the blood gushed forth from the quivering lips, the failing life torrent that bore Elinor Kent's sweet broken spirit home.

"An' didn't I tell ye," croaked Gran, who had come home, as she always did, with a fiercer light in her sunken eye, a sharper edge to her tongue, "didn't I tell ye what would come of taking in a half-dead girl? Ay, but ye're like that white, mealy-faced mother of yours that stood up for her own will and way agin us all! And now we've got the corpse on our hands, and who is to do the wakin' an' the buryin'?"

"I'll make it none of my business, I can swear to that."

"You needn't," said Barbara, sternly, though all the young heart within her was a quiver with strange new pain. "She left money in her trunk that will pay for all that she needs, and, besides, you know, there is her grandmother—"

"Eh, what—who—where?" asked Gran, who had come back after Elinor, under the quiver in Barbara's heart, had been laid white as cold in Barbara's darkened room upstairs.

"She got the letter at last," continued Barbara dully. "And it killed her."

"What letter are ye talking about, ye fool? It's your own wife that are gone, too, I'm thinking. It's half dead you've been looking all day, like the girl herself."

"Oh, grandmother, no, she wasn't dead at all. It was all true, all that Barbara said, and the quiver in Barbara's heart found eager voice for the pale, silent figure that could speak no more. "It was all true, grandmother. Her grandfather sent for her as she said he would, and if she had lived she could have gone to him and been rich and happy in the beautiful home she talked about. And now, now, she is dead and can have nothing—noting of all that was waiting for her; nothing but a grave."

"Did ye read the letter?" asked Gran, doubtfully.

"No," answered Barbara. "She died, and—and—I couldn't—"

"Go find it," said Gran, with the fierce command that had ruled the Road House for fifty years. And Barbara went upstairs to the darkened room that seemed so cold and still now that the battle for life was over and all the pain and outcry and piteous struggle hushed in a solemn calm.

The slender little form on the bed had been covered with a sheet, and all things were in strange, stiff order for old Huldah, like all her race, took grisly satisfaction in the service that adds to the chill pageantry of death.

The old negress had gone now, but carefully folded on the table beside the bed was the letter that had fluttered from Elinor's dying grasp. As Barbara took it up she saw with a sick shudder that the edge of the white paper was still wet with blood, mother, as she had been told.

"Read it now," said the old woman, and in a low voice that all her strength could not steady Barbara read:

My dear, dear child, my Elinor's child:—

Your father's last sad letter has just reached me after many weeks of delay; for I, with your uncle Gilbert's family, have just returned from a six months' trip to the south of Europe. I would telegraph to you if possible, but it is most likely that a telegram will find you, as no doubt if you have moved from Millboro, you have thought to leave your post-office address. Come to us at once. Your poor father wrote that he left you the means for this journey, so fulfill the last wishes dictated by an honest pride, which perhaps in the past I misunderstood.

"But all mistakes and misapprehensions, however bitter, are over now. Henceforth you are all our own. Your mother's home is waiting for you—your mother's name, if you please to take it, your mother's place."

"So, my little Elinor, come to me. Come and fill theaching heart you poor father wrote that he left you the means for this journey, so fulfill the last wishes dictated by an honest pride, which perhaps in the past I misunderstood."

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A welcoming light came into the strained eyes as her father bent over her and said in a low voice that tried to be steady:

"Do you want me, Una?"

"I want you to be near me, daddy, and I want mammy, too. I'm dying, and I want you all beside me; where's mammy?"

"I'll send Willie and Joe for her, a-stoir. She's up the town some-where, and maybe she won't be long."

"Oh, I think I know where she is," and a shade of pain and sorrow came into the poor white little face, "she's in the public-house again, and she told me one day she wouldn't drink any more, and that she'd stay with me here. I want her daddy; I want to ask her before I die to give up hurting God by getting drunk. Maybe she'll do what I ask her when she knows I'm dying. Tell Willie and Joe to hurry."

Hugh Kinella sent the two little boys on an errand that he feared was fruitless, and went back to the bedside of the dying child. Thoughts flashed across his mind of other days, when he had a happy home and a handsome sober wife, and all things going well with him, his trade increasing week by week, and the future looking bright and rosy. Then came the change, when the craving for drink took possession of his wife, and the clouds gathered dark above the once happy home. Now it was a common occurrence with Mary Kinella to spend the most of her days in the houses whose owners were degraded enough to supply her and her kind with drink; and she would come home, or rather be half carried home in the evening, heedless of everything, to sleep off the effects of the poison that was ruining her, body and soul. Now and then, thanks to patient Hugh Kinella and to kind Father Kearney, there was an effort at reform, and perhaps for a couple of weeks Mary would not taste a drop of drink, and hopes would glow in the hearts of Hugh and Nannie; but alas! the temptation would come, and with it Mary Kinella would stagger along the downward path again. Lately, she had hardly been a day sober, and poor Una (whose present state was due more to neglect in the first stages of a severe cold than any inherited disease) seldom saw her—she was spared by the thoughtfulness of the others, the sight of a mother who had fallen almost to the lowest depths and who seldom had a thought for the children, she should have fostered and loved, for the dying little one whose nurse and comforter she should have been. Now in the very shadow of death, Una was calling for her and there was no response. The thought smote Hugh Kinella to the heart, and he could scarcely bear to meet the anxious gaze of the dying child.

"Daddy—is mammy coming? I want—"

"Yes, yes, a-stoir, she'll be here soon. Do you want to tell her anything?"

"I want to tell her that I'll ask Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin."

"I want her to promise me—she won't—drink—any—more. Daddy—Nan—"

"Yes, Una, a-stoir, we're here."

"Father Kearney said you would—go—Holy—Communion—every—morning—for mammy. . . . Jesus—Mary—"

It was the last breath. Little Una's white soul was in heaven.

It was an hour later when Willie and Joe returned, but they did not bring their mother. She didn't seem to know what they meant when they told her that Una was dying, and when they pleaded with her to come she hunted them out of her presence with angry words. Perhaps it was better so, Hugh Kinella said in his own mind, and with a prayer to God for patience and strength, he set about preparing Una's little wasted body for the grave. And while he and Nannie made their simple preparations they spoke in whispers of Una's last words about daily Communion, and now that they had a little saint in heaven to help them, a great hope grew and glowed in their hearts.

It was late that night when Mary Kinella came home, and she was so utterly unable to either think or act that she noticed nothing strange about the house, but was got away to bed as quickly as possible. It was late next morning when she rose, and when she came down, sore in body and mind, the sight of her husband dressed in his best suit irritated her, as did the air of silence about the place, and she said, sullenly and sharply:

"Wisha, but you're a great gentleman, with your good clothes on your back. Where's the wake or the wedding?"

"Here, Mary," he said sadly, as he looked at her swollen face and blood-shot eyes, and motioned her towards the parlor door.

Una's body had been placed in the coffin, which now rested on a table near the window, the sunshine streaming in upon it like a smile from heaven. "Una is gone to God," he added, brokenly.

For a moment she could hardly realize it. Then with a wild cry of grief and remorse, as the truth burst in upon her brain, she flung herself across the tiny coffin and cried until Hugh thought her heart would break. It was the first time she had cried, in her sober years, for more than two years, and Hugh, knowing that it would do her good, quietly withdrew and left her alone with her grief and sorrow.

It was when Mary Kinella was convalescent, some seven weeks later, after the attack of brain fever that came to her on the day of little Una's funeral, that she learned from

Hugh the story of her child's last moments on earth. And then she said, with her hand in Hugh's, and her eyes raised tearfully to his face:

"Keep on the daily Communion for me, Hugh—you and Nannie. I have no faith in myself, but I feel that God will give me strength. Sure Una asked me two months before she died, to go to Holy Communion as often as I could, and I gave her my promise, but the drink got hold of me worse than ever. O Hugh, I'm not worthy of anything, but maybe some day God will give me the grace to be a good wife to you and a good mother to our children."

"He will, He will, Mary. There now, be quiet and rest. Nannie and myself started the daily Communion the day after the funeral, and we mean, with God's help, to continue it. If He gives you back to us, strong and happy, instead of our little Una, we'll be glad to think He took her white soul as the price of your freedom. There now, Mary; don't cry, but rest and get well."

And before six months had passed, Mary Kinella was strong again—strong in body and in soul, strong in hope for the future years. There were many hard struggles against the temptations of the drink demon, and sometimes it looked as if she would yield, but the thought of Una's soul as the price of her own redemption, and the grace the daily Communion of herself and her husband and children had brought her, sustained her in every trial, and to-day, beside the carpenter's shop where Hugh Kinella works with a light heart, there is a peaceful and happy home. A few weeks ago all the members of that contented family were enrolled as Associates of the great National Total Abstinence Congress, and few will bless its deliberations more fervently and sincerely than honest Hugh Kinella.

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