

SO AS BY FIRE

BY JEAN OONOR

CHAPTER XVII

A DEATH HOUR

The lights burned low in the death chamber. In the high, old-fashioned bed, whose damask curtains were flung back to give the dying man air, Judge Randall, his handsome old face pinched and ashen, was propped up among his pillows, struggling for breath. The small table beside him, with its crucifix, its tapers, its "fayre white cloths" told that the last sacred rites of that Church to which he and his forefathers had clung through all change and time had been administered to its loyal son. Dr. Vance stood gravely watchful at his patient's pillow. Father Lane, who had been kneeling by the bed whispering words of hope and comfort, rose as the newcomers entered, and made room for them by the dying man. "Nellie!" the falling ear caught the sound of her coming. "My dear little girl, I can not see you, all is dark. Nellie, are you here?" "Here—grandfather," the name came with a low, choked sob, as the speaker sank down and pressed the groping hand to her lips, the hand that had filled her life with all earth's gifts and blessings. How cold, how helpless it was to those lying lips now. "I am leaving you, my little girl, leaving you forever. Ah, my child, my poor Eleanor's child, in this awful hour—you are my one thought—my one fear." "Oh, I am not worth thought or fear, dear grandfather, best of friends. Do not think of me now," she sobbed. "I must," he gasped, "I—I must. Before God I will be held—accountable. My stubborn pride—my neglect—my—my years—of—of—his breath failed. "Father," he whispered, "Father, speak for me. Tell her—what—I would say."

"He has gone, dearest!" Allston Leigh was whispering tenderly, "gone, blessing your love with his last breath." She looked up. Vance was reverently closing the sightless eyes. Father Lane signing the cross on the death damp brow. Outside the servants had burst, after the fashion of their race, into unrestrained moans and lamentations. "Nellie, dear child, all is over. Come away," said Aunt Van, tearfully. "Not yet," was the gasping answer. "Not yet. Close the door, Allston. There is something I must say—here and now—"

she had stolen name, home, love, as well as gold. Ah, the fire was burning with fiercer power each moment, the fire that must consume destiny, the glittering, mocking lie she had lived—the fire that alone could save her shrinking soul. And the old pagan nature, unsubdued by long rejected grace, rose into a last fierce defiance at the pain. She could not bear it, she would not! There was escape still, escape from the shame, the horror, the awful death and desolation before her—there was one escape still. She rose from her knees, holding to the carved bed to steady her trembling limbs and slowly made her way to her lace-draped table, scattered with dainty trinkets in pearl and ivory and silver, with costly perfume and jewel caskets and all the exquisite toilet accessories of a reigning belle. She opened a hidden drawer and took from it a tiny box she had bought almost for its weight in gold from an old French chemist last summer when her torturing doubts and fears prevented natural sleep. She had sold these *pillules de sommeil* with a solemn warning: "No more than twice, never, never, mademoiselle. Three, four, and you would never wake."

And as the proud, lofty nature shook with its contending emotions, the words of that other lover came back to Allston Leigh. "You couldn't blame Weasel, no matter what she did, Judge, no matter what she did." Blame her! And then a great wave of conquering love overleaped all the stern barriers of pride, honor, bitterness. The lift of the red gold head, the glance of those starry eyes, the fair hands outstretched at last to his appeal as he stood before her in the freight glow last night—this had been truth, he knew, truth though all else were the blackest of lies. Truth—and he would hold to it and to her cost what it might. "There is but one thing to be done," he said, briefly. "She is my promised wife. As my wife this story can be hushed forever. I am Judge Randall's lawyer, his executor. All matters of unjust inheritance can be quietly arranged without publicity or scandal. I can give her an honored name and home."

THE TOLL OF WAR

By A. M. Foley

The old gray house looked sad and gloomy enough in the twilight. Even the last rays of the November sunset slanting on the tower served but to accentuate its grimness. The gaunt, bare trees with their leafless branches seemed sighing an eternal Requiem that evening. The extensive grounds, now bare and brown, stretched away at the back of the old, gray house until they sloped gently to the shore of the heaving, rushing sea—the ever changing sea that he loved to watch, that had called to him with her siren voice since first he was able to toddle there, his tiny hand held close in his fair-haired mother's—the voice that had called to him all through life, until when the first alarm of cruel war sounded throughout the land—his face glowing and his eyes sparkling—he buckled on his sword, bled his mother good-bye, never seeing the heart-break in her eyes, clasped his father's hand, unmindful of his husky voice, and went off to join his comrades on the long, grim greyhound of the sea, which were keeping watch and ward in the waters, that England might still be mistress of the seas. And no word had come from him—the brave laddie with the eager eyes. Up the gravelled path, in the chill November sunset, an old man toiled, a bunch of letters in his hand that trembled as he held them. "If there be no news of Master Harry this time, sure m'lady's heart'll break—I know it," he muttered to himself. "Ay, he was the bonny laddie, may the Virgin Mother watch over him," and the gaunt trees paused to whisper "Amen," ere they went on with their Requiem. As the old man reached the steps leading to the wide veranda, the door was suddenly thrown open, and a fair-haired woman rushed bare-headed to meet him. "Give them to me, Mark," she cried eagerly. "Oh, give them to me—my poor Harry, my son!" She almost snatched the letters from the old man, and feverishly ran through them until she found one that bore the long-looked-for seal. She held it up with a cry and dropped the others in her eagerness. But ere her quick fingers had broken the flap, a firm hand was laid over hers and a deep voice cried: "Margaret, Margaret, 'tis not June, love, and November evenings are chilly. How could you rush out so without your wraps?" His voice was gentle, but his eyes flashed as he saw the envelope in her hand. Tenderly he drew her towards the door, and old Mark gazed up the scattered mail and handed it to the head of the house. Lord Elvin took it mechanically and passed with his wife indoors. Mark watched them for a moment, then walked away slowly, shaking his head. "Ab, dearest," cried Margaret, as the door closed after them, "how could I think of myself, when there may be news of our boy?" She handed him the letter. "It is not his writing," she cried tearfully, "open it, Robert, I cannot bear to wait."

all I know, all I care, Robert. O Harry, Harry, why did you go, why did you leave me, Harry boy?" and she rocked herself back and forth, moaning. "Margaret, love, Harry could do nothing else; he belongs to a race of soldiers. Could he stay home, like any frightened woman, when his country needed him? Sweetest, generations of soldier-blood is stronger than a woman's arms, though it be his mother's."

When she entered the library, the fire had died in the grate and the room seemed strangely lonely and cold. Lord Elvin sat in his customary place, his head bowed on his chest and his arms hanging listlessly at his sides. A sob broke from her, and in a moment she was kneeling at his side, begging him to forgive her, that she had been wicked and cruel and hadn't meant the wicked things she said. But her husband did not answer. Fearfully she lifted startled eyes to the drawn face. "Robert!" she almost screamed. Quickly she placed her hand on his heart. A faint, unsteady beat rewarded her. She rang the bell sharply and when old Mark entered commanded him in a tone, cold and dead, to place his Master on the couch—he had one of his bad turns—and send immediately for the doctor. When the doctor had brought back consciousness, for a very little while, to the suffering man, Margaret was left with her husband. Dry eyes and pale as sat by his side, holding the cold hand in hers. There was no hysterical outburst now. The heart of her had been crushed at her son's death, it was dead now. He tried to talk, but she stopped him. "Don't, dear," she whispered, and her voice sounded strange and far-away. "You will be with Harry soon; pray that I, too, won't have to wait long, Robert." She thought she would strangle, but swallowed hard and pressed the hand that lay in hers. Her husband smiled wanly. "Kiss me, love," he whispered. "It won't be long." She bent and kissed him, then sank on her knees and buried her face in his pillow. "My brave little woman," murmured the dying man. "No! no!" Margaret lifted her head quickly. "I have been a coward, a selfish woman, I was not worthy of you two great men. But I will try, truly, Robert, I will try. I will try to be brave like the other women and do what I can to help the poor soldier—boys, for your sake and Harry's."

THE BISHOP'S SUBSTITUTE

A mule-cart rattled up the one street of which Howchow could boast, and as it approached Father Labarge's hut the driver called "Nui-kai," two or three times in a voice loud enough to have been heard half a mile away. In an instant the priest and John, his Chinese catechist, were at the door. The postman came but rarely and irregularly. His arrival was a great event and a letter or even a newspaper a treat not soon to be forgotten. On this day there was but one letter. It was addressed to Father Labarge, but John, catching a glimpse of large, peculiar writing, smiled broadly as he went back to his work of cleaning the three little rooms which formed the whole of their domain. He thought that almost immediately he would be called to hear the news, but minutes after minutes passed and Father Labarge said nothing, though as he pattered back and forth John could see he had finished reading. The hand that held the closely written sheets was hanging loosely at his side, and he was leaning wearily against the frame of the door, staring with troubled eyes at the dilapidated but nearest their own. At last the boy could bear it no longer. He sidled over to Father Labarge and peered questioningly into his face. The priest smiled. "Well, what is it?" he asked, mistakingly pretending not to understand. "It is the contents of the Bishop's letter."