

SO AS BY FIRE

BY JEAN CONNOR

CHAPTER XV

THROUGH THE STORM

The snow lay heavy on Roscroft's. The wide old house was hooded and mantled in winter—rose haw and hellebore and hederow white with spotted wreaths and garlands; the lawn stretched a dazzling slope to the blue curve of the river frozen from shore to shore. "So hard a winter," it was declared in the unimpeachable authority of stable and kitchen, "had not been known since before de wah." And in the midst and worst of it, the old house, closed and silent for long months, roused into sudden life. Fires blazed in the great rooms, the shuttered windows were flung open to the gray wintry light. Uncle Scip marshaled his domestic force into line. Aunt Dill, dousing the kitchen hearth, woke into warning and forecast again. "Ole Marster," was coming home after two years of absence. "Ole Marster and Miss Nellie were coming home!" But though it was the restlessness of an invalid that drove the Judge back to the old nest at this uninviting season, it was a cheery homecoming. The note of hospitable welcome sounded far and near—all up and down the river the great country houses flung open their doors in warm greeting to the returned travelers. The hard winter had brought its unusual pleasures of skating, sleighing, coasting, even the duck-hunters from the city found the latest game among the sheltered creeks, where the ice had not closed. Nellie entered into all with a feverish gaiety that only added to her charms. Half a dozen suitors were in the lists, and the week end parties at Roscroft were notable gatherings even in the hospitable record of the house. Aunt Van was a guest for the season. The old dame cheered the judge with extemporaneous sympathy he found nowhere else. Just to see Aunt Van, brisk and bracing under her sixty years, was a tonic in itself. And her recipes for broths and brews and gruels, garnered from three generations of housewives, were treasures beyond modern reach. For the down hill, as well as the uphill life, Aunt Van still held cheery help and hope. And just now she was head and front of all things, for Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Randall after seeing the Judge comfortably established, had returned to their own house in town.

Milly had gone with them temporarily, but they would all return for the week end. Meanwhile Nellie had been carried off this afternoon to the Dixons, ten miles distant, where there was to be an oyster roast to-night, followed by a dance that would have drawn every bean and bell for miles around at any other time. But even the Dixon oyster dance failed to draw. The leaden clouds that had been sullenly lowering all day burst into wintry wrath. The few gusts that dared its fury dashed up to the door powdered with snow and sleet, breathless with the fight through the driving storm. But there was a house party already gathered in the hospitable old mansion, and the "roast" went on merrily in the old kitchen—the absent musicians were replaced by Bens' piano and her brother Bob's fiddle, while motherly Mrs. Dixon shook down pallets and made up cots, declaring no one should leave the house that night.

Miss Randall had just led the Virginia Reel to a spirited close, and was standing by one of the wide windows looking out at the great trees whose boughs were swaying and writhing in the teeth of the wind, while she listened to young Banks, Wallace, the latest victim to her charms.

"The best night you ever saw, Miss Randall. I wouldn't have ventured a step from the door but that I heard you were here. Horse fell three times coming from the station, but I said I'd come if I had to walk every inch of the way. That is the way you get fellows you know. There is half a dozen of them ready to fight over you now."

"To fight over me! Dreadful!" said the young lady, disapprovingly. "I hope you are not one of the half dozen, Mr. Wallace?"

"No," said Mr. Wallace, who was young and pink and known by his intimates as "Bunny." "But I'd—I'd die for you all the same, if it would do any good."

"It wouldn't, I assure you," was the laughing rejoinder. "Fighting and dying are altogether out of date. There are no more pleasant things to be done now, don't you think so? Braving the storm, for instance, on a night like this. And here comes another related cavalier," as through the blinding swirl of snow without a sleigh dashed up to the front door, and in another moment good Mrs. Dixon's motherly voice was heard calling anxiously.

"Miss Randall? Nellie? Where is she? She can not venture out to-night. It is impossible, Mr. Leigh."

Miss Randall, with blanching face, hurried into the wide hall where Allston Leigh stood shaking the snow from his great fur-lined coat, an excited group gathered around him.

"My dear, my dear!" Mrs. Dixon clasped the white-faced girl tenderly in her arms. "You must bear up like a brave girl. It is your grandfather—he has had another bad attack, and—"

"It is—dead!" the girl cried out, sharply.

"No, no, not yet—but—but—"

"He is dying and has sent for me," she said, quickly. "Oh, I must go, I must go."

"But, my dear child, it is impossible," said Mrs. Dixon, positively. "Mr. Leigh will tell you so himself. It was all he could do to get here."

"And getting worse every moment," said Leigh. "But—he was calling for you—and I had to come—"

"Calling for me—for me!" she echoed. "Oh, then I must go, I must go. It is all I can do—now—"

"Dear, dear child, it is madness," pleaded Mrs. Dixon. "You'll never get to Roscroft. Nellie, Nellie, don't attempt it."

"Miss Randall, I protest!"

In the chorus that rose about her the girl's eyes sought Allston Leigh's face.

"You will take me?" she asked. "If I am willing to risk it, you will take me?"

"Yes," he answered.

And then the storm of remonstrance, of protestation fell about them, all in vain. In less than ten minutes, Nellie, wrapped in furs and robes that would defy arctic blasts, was seated at Leigh's side in the sleigh, skimming through the wild wintry storm, the wind shrieking behind them, snow and sleet beating pitilessly down upon their heads, the whole world a dim, blurred chaos of darkness and discord, in which they were alone.

Their horse, the most powerful one in the Roscroft stable, had been rubbed down and fed generously, and took the homeward road with renewed spirit.

"We'll manage it," said Leigh, cheerily. "Don't be frightened. Selim knows the road well and wants to get home. Of course the Judge didn't know what sort of a night it was or he would not have sent for you. But I had to come."

And he told her how the shock had fallen swiftly and unexpectedly while the old gentleman had been seated at his own fireside chatting pleasantly with Aunt Van.

"Lucky!" added the speaker. "Vance was in the house. We came down this morning together at the Judge's invitation for a couple of days' shooting. He is doing all he can, but he fears the worst. The Judge is an old man now and, well, the end must come for us all."

She did not answer him, she seemed to have no words to-night. The light, mocking, brilliant life she had made of herself vanished in this shadow of death. He was calling for her, this old man whose pride and love and trust she had mocked and betrayed, he was calling for her, and she must go to him, and lie to the over her, a horror of all that had been and was, a deeper horror of all that she must be forever, unless, unless—And then thought paused, shivering before the alternative.

Confession, Retraction, Restitution! The stern trilogy had been sounding for long through the mad music services and was impressed with the beauty of the music, of the flowers of her life. Confession, Retraction, Restitution!

Confession, with all its humiliation. Retraction with all its scorn and disgrace. Restitution, with all its poverty, despair, abandonment.

For the sleep walker had wakened. With the stolen fruit held in her reckless grasp, she stood on the daring height she had gained, the waterfall thundering beneath her, and there was no help, no hope.

Confession, Retraction, Restitution!

The words that had been a soft, low, almost unheard whisper in the early days of her stolen life, had grown into a stern insistence that all the triumphs of these after years could not silence.

They seemed borne on the wings of the wind as she sped through the storm and darkness to-night at Allston Leigh's side. There was no light in heaven or earth to guide them. Fences, hedges, all were buried, while ever and anon some fierce, daring light she had gained, the waterfall thundering beneath her, and there was no help, no hope.

"We'll make it all right," Leigh continued, cheerily. "Selim is doing nobly. We must be nearly on a line with Chapel Point now. Only a few miles more and we will see the lights of Roscroft." But even as he spoke, there was a shock, a lurch, and with an almost human cry of pain, Selim was down, struggling wildly in the traces. A smothered exclamation burst from Leigh's lips as he leaped out of the sleigh to the horse's head, and vainly tried to help the snorting, quivering animal to his feet.

"Oh, don't," cried the girl, pitifully. "Cut him loose from the traces—he is hurt—dreadfully hurt."

"Done for, I am afraid," said Leigh, grimly. "There must be a ditch or something here he can't see, and the poor beast has broken his leg."

"Oh, cut him loose!" she cried. "He is struggling so pitifully," and leaping from the sleigh, she stood beside Leigh in the darkness. "I will help you—"

"Stand back, in God's name," he called sharply. "We can see to do nothing, nothing. And you, you!"

"Don't think of me," she said. "I will sit here in the sleigh while you go for help. There are houses all along the road."

"The road," he echoed, helplessly. "We have lost the road or this would not have happened. We're—I do not know where. I should have known this venture was madness," he cried, desperately.

"But my madness, not yours," she said. "I took the risk. Oh, the poor horse!" Poor Selim! Can we do nothing for him?"

"What is the horse to you, your safety, your life?" A great drift swept down upon them as he spoke,

And he had to fling his arm about her and steady her against the blinding rush. "You must get back in the sleigh," he said huskily.

"And then—then?" she asked.

"I have loosed the traces. I will pull it myself."

"You can not," she said. "The runner is broken. I felt it go as the sleigh lurched. We must walk. We are not in the wilderness. There must be shelter somewhere within reach. And it is all my fault, from beginning to end. So don't swear at yourself under your breath any more, please."

There was a new music in her tone, that wonderful light, brave note with which women like this meet peril when love is near.

Leigh's heart leaped to it as if it were a bugle call. He would save her, shelter her, keep her from all harm to-night—and forever after.

"Put your arm in mine and hold fast, and we will try—" the wind howling down upon them nearly drove away speech and breath—"we will try to find a way together."

And the strength of ten men seemed to enter into Allston Leigh as with that slender form clinging to him for life and safety, he faced the wild sweep of snow and sleet, the mad rush of the scurrying drifts that swept by them like troops of sheeted specters, all the wild turmoil of this terrible night, his heart aglow.

But the light hold on his arm grew heavier each moment.

"Have you any idea where we are?" his companion's voice trembled as she asked the question with all the old lightness. "We seem to have passed earthly bounds and to be adrift in space."

"Not quite. There is a telegraph pole," he answered, "which means we've struck the turnpike again. Poor Selim was making for the short cut home. Don't be afraid. No harm shall come to you. I am strong enough for both." She started glad on at his cheery word, but her feet were numb, a strange torpor was creeping over her, she felt as if she were swaying over a great void, Allston Leigh's arm her only hold. Then faintly through the storm of wind came a welcome sound.

"Sleighbells!" cried Leigh, jubilantly. "Hello, there, hello! Help! help! help!" A great double sleigh, speeding swiftly through the storm, stopped at the summons.

"Who calls?" shouted the driver.

"Here, here, man. We have broken down and we are miles from home. Take us in, for God's sake. This is Miss Randall of Roscroft with me. I am Allston Leigh—"

"Lord!" cried a cheery, familiar voice through the wild darkness. "This is luck, Judge."

"Mills!" exclaimed Leigh, in amazement.

"Nobody else," was the hearty rejoinder, as the muffled driver held to his camping steeds. "Can't let go of these horses, for they're a bit shrewy. Judge, but just put the lady in and give your orders. This team is yours to command. Plenty of b'arskin back there to keep you warm, mine. Lord, Judge, but it was luck to strike you this way, sure."

"Luck, indeed!" said Leigh, as he lifted the half-fainting girl into the sleigh, and wrapped her warmly in the b'arskin, and then sprang to the front seat beside the driver, who continued to shout his cheerful explanations over the storm. "I drove out with two of Rocketton's men to-day, to see about a grinder they had put in a stone yard down 'bout here. They wanted me to stay all night with the rest, but it takes more than a baby blizzard like this to house me. Got to be in Washington to-morrow morning, so I can't fool around here all winter. Now where shall I take you lady? Steer this machine where and how you please, so as to get her under roof quick."

"Keep straight on," said Leigh, "I'll tell you when to turn—we're all right now. Not three miles from Roscroft," turning to the muffled figure behind him. "We are all—all right."

There was no answer. The girl, wrapped warmly in the bearskin, felt as if she were turned to stone. The laughing, mocking, beautiful Lie that she had been for more than two years crouched there in the darkness, still and cold, while Barbara Graeme lived again at Dafy's voice.

It was all gone—gone—the glittering dream—she was back again on the old broken porch of the Road House, with Rip fluttering in her arms. She was seated on the soap box in Dafy's store listening to her first love tale. She was in the black-beamed old kitchen with Gran stirring the bean soup. She was the friendless starveling again, in her sunbonnet and sweater, but with no gilded chains holding her, no warning voice thundering in her soul day and night, no fear or remorse eating into her heart. She was Barbara Graeme again and free, free, free!

The end had come. Dafy was here, and the lie she had lived would shrivel before his honest eyes at the first glance. How or whence he had come she was too dull, and numbed to think. And like one who in stony calm awaits the death blow, she sat wrapped in the fur robes. Mute and still while the sleigh swept on through the white wastes, with the mocking wind shrieking behind them and the deep voices of the two men who loved her coming brokenly to her in the lulls of the storm.

"That petition you fixed up is all right, Judge, it'll do the business. We'll get him out to die free. If it hadn't been for you taking hold I couldn't have managed it at all. Here is your gate."

"I am very sick—I won't be long here."

"Of course you are a Catholic?"

"Well, Father, I used to be, but it's thirty years since I went to my duty."

"Well, my son, God is very good to give you this chance to save your soul. How merciful He is, and how anxious to restore you to grace. I know you want to make your confession, and how peaceful and happy you will be when it is over."

"But, Father, I don't think I am ready to go to confession; I don't know how to begin."

"Oh! don't worry about that," I said, "I will help you. Come, now, let us begin." And I put on my stole. There was no one very near, and I was able to help the poor fellow to make a most satisfactory confession. He took time; but his repentance was so sincere that I blessed God for sending me to him. He was extremely weak, and I thought it better to anoint him. I explained the sacrament, and he rejoiced to receive it. After absolution he seemed like another man, eager for every grace the faith could give him. After the anointing was over he looked at me with moist eyes: "How can I ever thank God for sending you to me!" he said.

"Spent this evening in saying your prayers," I replied, "and to-morrow I will bring you Holy Communion!"

I bade him good-by and started down the aisle to leave the Hospital.

As I came towards the end of it, a man with a gray beard started up in bed, and called me:

"Father," he said, "O! thought ye would never be through with that renegade, and its meself that sint for ye. O! want to make me first Friday. O! haven't missed a month!"

"What is your name?" I said in amazement.

"Why, me name is Private Kane!"

"And what is the name of the man I have left?" I said.

"Sure his name is Private Kane, too. He is Tom, and O! an John Kane. We never saw each other before he came here, and he is in the fourth bed at that end, and I am in the fourth bed at this end. I axed one of the committee ladies to go for ye, for O! wanted to make me first Friday, and it will be to-morrow, Father. Won't ye hear me confession?"

It was easy to hear the monthly confession of this good old soldier, and he made it with edifying sentiments of faith and contrition. I promised to bring him Holy Communion the next day, and told him about his namesake, who had received such grace from God that day.

"Glory be to God!" he exclaimed. "O!'ve been praying for him! He was a brave soldier, O! am told, and the Lord has been good to him!"

I smiled at his earnestness, but I felt that his prayer had been heard. The next day I gave both of them Holy Communion.

Private Tom Kane lingered only a day or two, but John still lives—a day invalid who is always praying for some one's conversion, particularly if he has the name of Kane!

Here was a marvelous instance of God's love. How was it directed to that bed, where I was not expected, and yet where God was knocking at the heart of a strayed sheep, longing to take him home?—By Rev. Richard W. Alexander in the Missionary.

PRIVATE KANE

Seated one day in my study, I was reading my office, and pondering over the poetry of the Psalmist that never grows old, even by daily use. Full of God's pity and mercy, the psalms ring the changes of love and sorrow, and above all, of infinite hope.

A knock at the door disturbed me, and I reluctantly said, "Come in," while I held my finger in my breviary, and showed a serious face to the intruder.

It was the housekeeper. "I beg pardon, Father, for disturbing you at your office," she said timidly, "but there's a very respectable lady in the reception room, and she says she won't keep you a minute. I closed my book, I warmly blessing the lady, and went to meet her."

As I entered the room, I recognized a non-Catholic lady whom I had occasionally met, a woman of high standing in the town.

"I beg pardon for my intrusion, Father," she said in refined accents, "but I am on the Board of the Soldier's Home on the hill, and I was leaving the Hospital this afternoon one of the old soldiers called me to his bedside and asked me most earnestly if I would send him a priest. I hesitated, not being a Catholic, but he seemed so much in earnest and looked at me so pleadingly that I could not refuse him, and so I came here rather timidly. Your housekeeper said you were busy at this time, and said not to be disturbed. But I said I would detain you only a few moments," and she rose with a winning smile.

"I am delighted you came, Madam," I responded; "while I was busy, I am always ready for any interruption like this, and yours is a welcome one. What is the name of the old soldier?"

"He said he was Private Kane," she replied; "the porter will show you his bed. I must not detain you any longer," and she graciously held out her hand, and went towards the door, and bade her good-by.

I looked at my watch. I had time to go to the Home, and return before supper. It might be urgent, I thought, I laid my breviary aside, took my hat and left, bringing with me the holy oils.

When I reached the Hospital, I asked the porter who admitted me, if there was an old soldier there by the name of Kane. He answered respectfully that there was, and showed me a long ward with two rows of beds.

"The fourth bed from the end, Father: a man with a gray beard."

I walked along between the beds the whole distance of the aisle. In the fourth bed from the end I saw a man with a gray beard who looked inquiringly at me. I went to him, and took his hand. He seemed very ill. "Is your name Kane?" I said. "Yes, Father," he replied, languidly. "You seem pretty sick, my son." I said, wondering that he was so undemonstrative, but ascribing it to his condition.

GRAY-HAIRED PRIEST ON BATTLEFIELD

On the battlefield of Soissons—I wish I could show you the little gray-haired priest of this village near Soissons as he goes about his duties these days.

There's the peace of a certain Wallace and that he knows about on his face and he reads his services over a dead German with the same tender tones and the same smile or hope that he has for the dead soldier who sleeps in the red, white and blue of France.

I first saw him as he passed through the village square in his robes that had once been white. His surplice was splashed with the mud of hundreds of automobiles which dash through the narrow, wet streets. On his feet were army shoes, as muddy as any soldier's. But he raised his face as he chanted a service from a book in his hands and when I saw his smile I forgot the crime. Behind him marched four men, guarded by soldiers. Even before I knew who or what they were I saw that there was something especially evil and gruesome about them. A French officer explained the procession to me.

"These men were caught wearing civilian clothes. Maybe they were spies; who knows? But they are worse than spies. They were caught looting the French and German dead out there on the battlefield. They are being taken out now to be shot."

AT RED CROSS HOSPITAL

It was a thing to shudder over, but the little clergyman marched on with the look of hope and mercy on his face as if he knew someone who understood and even controlled all this madness and evil into which humanity has fallen. Someone who knows the weakness of humanity so well that he might have pity even on a man who had robbed the dead.

The next time I saw the little clergyman was at the entrance to the Red Cross hospital. Three caskets stood in the high hallway which opened onto the street. A line of French soldiers stood at attention, facing the doorway. A Red Cross ambulance drove up and the soldiers broke their rigid formation to make way for five wounded soldiers who were carried past the coffins where three dead soldiers rested.

The soldiers reformed again. There was evidently a hitch in the proceedings. The church was across the street and, by the glances of the officers toward the church door, I could see they were waiting for the clergyman. Then I saw him come to the door.

Five women and two little girls, all in black, were following him, persistently, and speaking to him. He stopped and spoke a moment with each woman. They knelt, one at a time, on the sidewalk, as he raised his hand in blessing over each mourning bedecked head. He held his hands on the heads of the little girls and raised his face upwards as if he were telling someone to take special notice of two little folks who needed extra care.

All this time the soldiers were waiting. The priest walked across the street, through the mud, his soldier's shoes spattering the dirt into his surplice, the officers saluted, the soldiers raised the caskets, the little priest led off through the slush and the three dead soldiers of France were started on their last march.

WAR CHAPLAIN'S DUTY

I've seen the little priest a score of times since then. He marches more than any soldier. There are scores of dead to bury; there are dozens of stories and confessions to hear from dying men in the hospitals; there are the broken hearted women and children of the village who have lost their soldier loved ones to be comforted, and his task was so great that it seemed to me that if I were the little priest and saw so much of such a terrible sorrow in a world gone so far away I would take off my white robe and fold it away and say, "God has forgotten us. What's the use?"

Only I know by the little clergyman's face that he knows that God has not forgotten us, even though the cannons of men who are hungry to kill are sounding above the chant of the funeral services and even though each crash means more broken hearts and more dead to bury. —By William G. Shepherd, United Press Staff Correspondent.

THE GREAT MESSAGE

To day we are cursed by overspecialization. It is no longer enough to say to a man, "Be good." If there are a thousand ways for a man to be bad, you must tell him the thousand particular ways in which he can be good. In an age of specialists, the moralist must specialize just as much as the other scientists; otherwise very few will understand him even if they show enough interest to listen to him, which is improbable.

Perhaps that is why the social message of the Catholic Church has reached so few at the very time when every one needs it most. The old inclusive commands sound trite to many a worldly ear. What is more, the ways of giving them have, in many cases, become ineffective. To-day men expect things to be brought into their homes and daily lives. They no longer go out to seek truth or moral help.

The crazed specialists who fill our schools and colleges, who write for our magazines, who dabble in philanthropy, and lead our laborers, have no desire at all to ask the Church for her opinion. If the Church has anything to say, they expect her message to be brought to them by some obliging person, and they expect it to be brought in a form they understand. This attitude of the specialists may be the result of laziness or merely of bewilderment. In any case, it is exasperating. But that does not alter the fact that it exists, and that it accounts very largely for the failure of the Church to bring her message home to these wandering souls by the old methods.

The opinion of the Church is so little known by Protestants and agnostics that they have actually come to the conclusion that she has no opinion at all. Even some Catholics are showing a lack of confidence in the Church. They themselves have come under the specialist's spell. They have heard what those outside the Church say; and being human and weak they have turned traitor.

As a matter of fact, the message of the Church was never fresher or more virile than to-day. Its very freshness and simplicity help to hide it, just as the simplicity and child-like qualities of a really great man often make him obscure. The message is so simple that the youngest child in our schools knows it by heart. "Love the Lord, thy God; and love thy neighbor as thyself for the love of God."

In this exquisitely simple command is summed up "all the law and the prophets." It is the greatest social message the world has ever known. Even if a man is an agnostic or an atheist, it is at least possible for him to love those about him. He can fulfill the human part of the message, even if he is unconscious of the divine motive.

The love which Christ preached and the Church preaches to-day is far more than mere sentiment or emotion. Your love for your fellow men may show itself in a hundred ways, none of which could be branded as emotionalism. You can not rob a man if you love him; and you can not be indifferent or unjust to him. With love, the dishonesty, the hatred, the envy, all the evils that tear us to pieces, are impossible. The love "of the law and the prophets" is the central moral force of the universe. Its negation is decay, death, hell. The source of this love is known to naturalistic science as magnetism, its effect is called cohe-

MORE TALES OF HEROISM

Tales of heroism and of suffering are multiplied daily, declares our European correspondent. From Tournai, Belgium, comes the story of how two nuns met death while assisting a sick member of their community. At the commencement of the funeral which surprised the inhabitants of Tournai, a sick member of the community of the Sacred Heart was lying in the upper part of the convent, and the superiors, wishing to guard her against the noise and the bullets, went up with another Sister to place a mattress in the window. As they approached the window a bullet entered, struck the youngest Sister, a brave Bretonne full in the chest, killing her instantly, and ricocheting, passed through the arm of the Rev. Mother Budet, who only survived two days. The object of their care was unharmed.

Almost too painful to dwell upon is the story of how Father Veron, S. J., met his death. His companion, the Abbe Suenr, tells of his long Calvary. During the retreat he and Father Veron, both army chaplains, got separated from their column. They were arrested with several peasants by Prussian troops in a small village of the Aisne. For six days they were marched between files of soldiers with fixed bayonets and in company with many prisoners, civilian and military, towards Paris, their guards jeering at the retreating allies.

Then when the retreat from Paris began, and coming defeat loomed on the horizon, they were marched to the North again, and despite their fatigue and semi-starvation were loaded with the heavy burdens of the soldiers. Their only food was a few apples picked as they marched and a little water. Through it all Father Veron continued to say his daily prayers and recite the Rosary five times each day in place of saying the Breviary, while his one preoccupation was to get back to his soldiers when released.