

THROUGH THORNY PATHS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"My pride again, Cecelia. When I considered what my fashionable Protestant friends would say if I became a Catholic, I felt that I could never have the courage to make the sacrifice, but the thought of having you, my peerless darling, you above all others, know that I was false to the dictates of my own conscience was the hardest of all to bear, therefore I suffered in silence pangs of remorse few can understand."

"Poor dear grandma, you have been doing yourself a great wrong and I am truly sorry for you, but if you will permit it, I will help you to have it righted without delay."

"I see it all now, and I am very sorry I delayed so long. I understand what you mean and I am ready to go with you at once to call on one of your priests and become a member of your Church. Had it not been for the awful experience I had a few weeks ago I might still have persisted in my blind course."

"You mean the fire, grandma?"

"Yes, that awful night when, led inside a Catholic Church by you, I was brought, as it were, face to face with death. All the events of my life passed through my mind in rapid succession, but worse than all were those doubts. I looked at you, my heart bleeding at what I felt you must be suffering, but I was surprised to see that a perfect calm had settled on your face, while your eyes were firmly fixed on that golden object the priest had placed on the altar. You appeared to be looking upon some bright spirit I could not see, for there was a smile of perfect trust on your face, and I knew that you were lifted above fear of the danger surrounding you. I would have given all I possessed for a share of your happiness. I made a solemn promise to God that if we were spared from death I should delay my conversion no longer."

Cecelia's heart was too full for words, but she gently crossed the room, and laying her hand on her grandmother's silvery locks broke into tears of joy, and the two wept together in silence.

"Grandma," she found voice to say at last, "are you willing now to go with me to my grotto of Lourdes and say one prayer in thanks giving in honor of our dear Mother in heaven, who has sent you this wonderful grace?"

"Yes, Cecelia, my darling, my angel lead the way."

It was a cold December day, but the two headed not the chilling blast as they knelt together in prayer on the frozen ground at Mary's feet. They did not know that they were being watched by both Mrs. Daton and her sister.

"Do look at that!" exclaimed the former, "Who would have believed it if they did not see it with their own eyes? I really fear that mother must be doing. I have noticed that she has been acting very strangely of late. But what a wonderful power Cecelia has over her!"

"Yes," said the other, "Cecelia certainly has a wonderful power over her grandmother, but, God be praised, it is the power of good, and she will lead her as a child into the path of right. As for her dotage, I fear, sister, that you were deceived, for her mind is wonderfully clear."

"It is more than I ever dared hope for. She has even been a most bitter enemy of the Catholic Faith, and in her presence I have often feared to practice my religion as I desired."

"Pardon me, sister, if I appear to censure you, but I fear you have sometimes been too timid with her, and as a punishment you are undoubtedly about to see your more courageous child win the crown that might have been yours."

Mrs. Cullen was right, for much as she had once despised the very name of Catholic, Mrs. Daton was possessed of a noble intellect, which might not have so strongly resisted the truth had it not been for her daughter-in-law's weakness and reticence in matters of religion. It almost seemed that something was being hidden from her and she had been too proud to inquire until won by Cecelia's bright example. To the younger Mrs. Daton's discredit, the lady had often thought within herself that there must be something wrong hidden beneath a religious belief of which one of its members was so much afraid to speak. But Cecelia had cleared away the cloud.

In charity to Mrs. Daton we must admit that the world is full of unbelievers, narrow-minded bigots, who, having been trained from infancy to despise the truth, refuse to believe and stubbornly adhere to falsehood rather than listen to the truth when golden opportunities are given them. For such there is undoubtedly little chance of salvation, and of this class the lady, from early unpleasant experiences, believed her mother-in-law to be one. This, together with the sad fact that religion was too often considered as a secondary matter after the requirements of society had been fulfilled, was the cause of the lady's reticence.

But Grandmother Daton was of a far different stamp, and needed only good example and patience to teach her the truth she had now so willingly embraced. There are many like her in this world, noble souls they are, and if these spend their whole lives and go to the grave in the darkness of ignorance, is it just to judge them rashly and say that they are more responsible for their error than those who should have been but refused to be their teachers?

For a time Mrs. Daton's conversion was the talk of her friends, many of whom said she was already in her dotage and had been deluded by the women of her household, but her faith had become so firmly rooted that she was able to defend herself among them all, and after a time the gossips turned their attention to other and newer subjects.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The days following her grandmother's reception into the Church were happy ones for Cecelia. The only thing that now marred the brightness of her home life was the fact that her dear father still remained an unbeliever, but she hoped and prayed with all her heart that the time might not be far distant when he would follow his mother's good example. She wanted only this added blessing, then she would go back to spend her life in the convent where she had been educated. Of the second desire she never spoke, but of the first she could now talk freely with grandmother, who was no less anxious than herself to see his conversion.

Of late Mr. Daton had acted strangely at times, and there seemed to be something on his mind that troubled him deeply, but what it was no one could fathom. Some thought that perhaps his mother's change of religion had something to do with it, but his mind was too little given to such things for that to make much difference. He was pleased to see the ladies of his household all of one faith, and attending church together, but the need of anything of the kind as far as he himself was concerned had never been seriously considered. He always supplied the ladies with money to give liberally to their Church, and that he considered the end of his duty. If he gave any thought whatever to the hereafter, it was manifested in a belief that as he had always endeavored to lead an honest and upright life, he was entitled to a higher place in heaven than many church members whom he knew failed to live up to all the principles they professed.

Once Cecelia ventured to inquire regarding his health.

"I am perfectly well," he answered in his manner expressing surprise, "Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because you seem changed of late."

"Changed! If there has been a change, I am not aware of it."

"There has been, papa, and if you are perfectly well physically, there must be something on your mind that is troubling you."

"Really, Cecelia, you seem to be gifted with second sight."

"I am not to be deceived, papa. I know something must be wrong and I want to do all I can to help you."

"There is nothing you can do, child, but in your lack of ability to assist me I appreciate your good intentions none the less."

"Then it is really so that you are worrying about something?"

"Why ask such a question, child, after I have assured you it is not in your power to aid me?"

"Papa, please tell me has grandma's conversion to the Catholic Church anything to do with what appears to be making you unhappy?"

At this question, which sounded so

absurd to the man of the world, Mr. Daton laughed heartily, and it did Cecelia good, for it not only assured her that she had made a mistake, but it sounded more like her father of old. "Child, so long as the members of my household live up to their principles, whatever they may be, it matters little to me what church they may attend. My mother has a perfect right to do what she likes, and perhaps, after all, it is better to have you all attending the one church."

"You are right, papa; but do you not think it would be far better still if you, too, were a member of our Church?"

"Perhaps so, Cecelia," he replied, unwilling to disagree with her who was far more to him than life itself; "but I have so much to attend to that I have no time to be troubled with church affairs."

"Papa," she said, reproachfully, "papa, you do not, you cannot mean that. You have a soul to save as well as the rest of us, and should take the time to think of your salvation."

"Cecelia, has your father ever by word or example done anything that you would consider unworthy of a Christian?"

"I did not mean it in that way, papa, for you have ever been in your own home and also in your dealings with others all that a true Christian should be, and I cannot forget your bright example, but it would be untold happiness for me to see your noble life sanctified by the influence of our holy religion, for then in your good works might be found true merit which would bring you a bright reward in heaven."

It was more than Cecelia had ever said to her father before, and she with the devotion and love of God with which her pure heart overflowed. Her father, in spite of the belief that she was carrying things too far, could not help admiring her. He gazed steadily at her for a few minutes. The light in her dark eyes seemed to be growing brighter and more heavenly, but it moved him not.

"I am glad, Cecelia, if your religion makes you happy, and I would not have you give it up, but, as I told you before, I have no time to waste on such things, so please do not talk any more on the subject."

The words, kindly meant rather than otherwise, cut Cecelia to her heart's core and it was hard for her to repress her tears. At length she found courage to say:

"Dear father, I hope it will not be long ere you feel differently. I feel now that there is some trouble on your mind, and I wish I could help you."

"To see my daughter cheerful and happy is all that I ask of her. I must admit that business has caused me some worry of late, and perhaps I do show it in my looks, though I would not if I could help it. But such is the way with many in my position and I trust it will soon all pass over."

"I do not comprehend your meaning dear father, but I wish I could help you. I would do anything and every thing in my power."

"I know you would, Cecelia, and I fully appreciate the kind generosity of your loving heart. You may go now; I have some papers I wish to look over."

"Can I not help you, papa? You look tired."

"No, dear child; I prefer doing it alone."

She was gone from the room now, the light and sunshine of his life, and he sat staring vacantly at the door she had closed behind her, his mind filled with sad thoughts.

"Poor child," he sighed, "how little does she suspect; but I will fight against it and she must not know the truth, for it would break her tender heart. For her sake, it not for the others, I must keep up."

The foregoing conversation had taken place a few days after Grandmother Daton's conversion. With her other multiplied duties, including the demands of society, Cecelia was busily engaged instructing the convert for her first Communion. In this way the secret troubles of her father, who always tried to appear cheerful in his own home, were forgotten for the time, and if he did think of him it was mostly while at prayer, when she poured out her earnest supplications for his conversion. The Christmas holidays had passed pleasantly

and uneventfully, and it was the second week in January when she was called to the parlor, where, to her great surprise, she found her father in company with the manager of the Clinton Opera troupe. The man greeted her most kindly, but she met him with a dignified reserve which she had ever been accustomed to show among strangers.

"You may be surprised, Miss Daton," he said, "to receive a call from me in your own home, but you once rendered us valuable assistance, and I have come to ask another favor of you."

"If it is to sing in public, I fear I must decline."

"I deeply regret to have you speak so discouragingly. Our leading prima donna having completely lost her health, has been forced to resign, and you are the only lady I have ever met who can satisfactorily fill her place."

"I could not think of such a thing. You sang for us once, Miss Daton; and most beautifully; will you not try once more?"

"What I did that night was done for charity. Under no other condition would I consent to appear in public."

"If you will but consent to join our troupe for a few weeks you will be well paid."

"Thank you for your kind offer, but I will say frankly that I do not like the thought of appearing before the public, and therefore cannot consent to leave my home."

And she gave a sign that the interview was ended.

"Miss Daton, I deeply regret your decision, but I shall not consider it final. I shall call again in two or three days, when you have fully considered the matter."

"My answer is final," she said, "so you need not trouble yourself to call again. There are others in this city who have excellent voices and some of them would be glad to grasp such an opportunity."

"There are, as you say, many who have fine voices, but it would take a long time and much work to train them to fill the place as you once did. Our present necessity is a trained voice like your own, and the lack of such a voice may cause us to lose much of the fame we have acquired."

He was strongly tempted to tell her that her brilliant beauty was also an important factor, but he was too much of a gentleman for that, and also was fully aware that to a modest young woman like herself such a thing would be highly offensive. He admired her the more for her reserve, and he made a secret resolution that if he were to have the good luck of securing her services he would watch over her and protect her as carefully as if she were his own daughter.

"Father," said Cecelia, after the man had gone, "did you know the object of Mr. Karsten's visit before I came down?"

"I did, Cecelia."

"Then why did you allow him to meet me? Did you not know that such a useless interview would be most unpleasant to me?"

Her father was silent for a time, and when he spoke his voice was sad and wholly unlike his own, so that it almost frightened the girl.

"Cecelia, we all have to meet many unpleasant things in this world, and as you are no longer a child, it is time for you to understand it."

"What do you mean, father? I do not comprehend."

"Perhaps you remember the little conversation we had not long ago?"

"I do, father; but what has that to do with this?"

"You rightly suspected that I was in trouble, but you did not know the nature of it, and I hoped you never should, but I fear it is useless to try and keep my secret longer."

She arose, and crossing the room to where he sat, laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

"Father, what is the meaning of this? Please tell me, and I promise to do anything in my power to help you."

"Do you really mean that, Cecelia?"

"Mean it? Certainly I do. I should consider myself a most ungrateful daughter after all you have done for me if I did not."

He turned and looked her fully in the face, as if he would read in her eyes the inmost secrets of her heart. Holding both her hands, which were growing hot with fear, he said:

"Do you fully realize, Cecelia, what you have promised?"

"I ought to, father, for as you told me, I am no longer a child."

"And would you be willing to make a sacrifice for me?"

He felt her hands trembling, but her voice was clear as she said: "Anything in my power."

"You are a good girl, Cecelia, and perhaps you may be able to save your father from ruin and keep a home for yourself and parents."

"Father, tell me what you mean. Something terrible, I am sure."

"Only that I am in great danger of going the way that many a rich man has gone before. I have foolishly invested largely in stocks which are in danger of becoming worthless, and we are in great peril of losing the home which was the pride of my father's early days."

For nearly an hour he talked, explaining everything to her, and many times she was on the verge of tears. For his sake she summoned all her strength to the ordeal, and when he had finished she said:

"Poor, dear papa, I am truly sorry for you. And now, what can I do to help you?"

"By accepting the offer made you this afternoon."

"What! go on the stage. You cannot mean it."

"Yes, child, I do. It grieves me sadly to think of your engaging in an occupation so distasteful to you, but after you have sung a few evenings you will not mind it much."

"Is there nothing else? No occupation where I shall not be brought much before the bold gaze of the public? Oh, father, anything but that I would not only be willing, but happy to work hard at home from dawn until dark. But to travel with strangers and be stared at by the public! It is too hard and I cannot do it."

"Cecelia, there would be much difficulty in your getting work to do at home, for there are already too many idle in the city who are looking for such work, and in any event your earnings would be too small to count."

Cecelia bowed her head for a few moments in sad reflection.

"Does mother know of your trouble?"

"Not yet, Cecelia; I dreaded to tell her because I knew too well what a bitter blow it would be."

"Poor mamma, it will indeed be hard for her, and I wish that it could be kept a secret from her."

"I wish so too, child, but this evening she must know all. In regard to your going on the stage, the prospect is no more pleasant for me than to yourself. I dread the thought of being separated from my child, but the hard position in which I am placed compels me to give the matter earnest consideration."

Cecelia could say no more and left her father with a heavy heart. Deep drifts lay around her grotto, so she could not go there with her new sorrow, but on her knees in her own room she gave vent to her feelings in tears and prayers. Within her tender heart a terrible conflict waged between duty to assist her father and her love of retirement. Her tears relieved the tension and through God's grace courage was given her to face whatever might come. It was well for her, for it required all her efforts to console her mother that evening, and to prevent her from revealing the secret which they wished to hide as long as possible from the elder Mrs. Daton and Agnes.

Mrs. Daton had been absent when Mr. Karsten called and did not learn of his visit until after the story had been told. In the sad state of her mind it was at first difficult for her to fully appreciate the tribute thus paid to her daughter's talents, but when convinced that the offer had been made without any thought on the manager's part that he was really doing an act of charity, she began to see things in a different light. Her impending loss was forgotten for the hour in the flattery her pride had received in the promise of her daughter winning fame as a singer.

The girl had hoped that her mother might by her persuasions help keep her at home, but when she learned the contrary she was sorely grieved, and it was only after a long confidential talk with her confessor that she was finally persuaded to make the sacrifice. The good man inwardly dreaded to see such a tender flower of his flock put in so trying a position, but trusting in her virtue to withstand whatever temptations might be thrown in her way, he told her that 'it might be best to comply with her parents' wishes. He assured her, at the same time, that if she remained faithful to her religion, as she had ever done in the past, God would watch over her and she had nothing to fear.

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