

THROUGH THORNY PATHS.

BY MARY ROWENA COTTER.

CHAPTER XVI.

Amongst the work of charity the cousins had taken upon themselves, was to accompany the good Sisters who assisted at Mass in the prison chapel and sing during the Holy Sacrifice. To Cecelia it was a most pleasant occupation, though she could never leave the place without a feeling of sadness and deep sympathy for those whom crime had brought there. Sometimes in company with her cousin, sometimes with the Sisters, or alone, she would linger for hours, going from one cell ward to another, cheering the suffering and sad-hearted, and many who had never seen the better side of life felt in her presence that the world was not all as hard as they had pictured it. She soon came to be known as an angel of mercy, and her coming was eagerly looked for, even among the most hardened. Young as she was, Cecelia's visit to this desolate place taught her many a deep lesson which could never have been learned from books. When on leaving school the girls had been asked to assist in the work at the prison, they had both readily taken it up as a novelty. Agnes was of too light a character to have what she saw produce much effect upon her, and she simply looked on the inmates of the prison as a class of men and women who were being justly punished for crimes they had committed, and she took little more thought of the matter excepting to hope that they might be brought to repentance and learn to do better. Very much the same was it with Cecelia in the beginning, but she would not be content until she had learned many of the secrets underlying those broken lives, and slowly but surely she awoke to the fact that many of the worst criminals were not so wholly on account of the evil of their own nature, but through bad influence brought to bear upon them, some from the evil effects of their early home training, others, alas! through the bad example of those who perhaps held themselves up as models of perfection before the refined society the poor culprit dared not enter. In one ward she found a girl but little older than herself, though in appearance more than ten years her senior. Hers had once been a pretty face, but the light of youthful beauty had faded from the deep blue eyes and the golden curls had been cut tight to her prettily shaped head while her face wore a careworn look wholly out of place in one so young. Stealing money from her employer, a woman greatly respected on account of position and highly reputed wealth had been her offense, and Cecelia first saw her on the eve of her trial, a few days after her arrest. At first when she addressed her, the girl eyed her suspiciously, taking in every detail of her stylish street costume, then turned her head away, as if in disgust. Laying her hand gently on her arm and speaking in her kindest tones, Cecelia said: "My poor woman, you are in trouble. Can I not do something for you?" "Nothing," was the cold reply. "I expect nothing but to have to serve a term of imprisonment here, and you cannot help me." She once more turned away in cold disdain; but something about her attracted Cecelia, so she was unwilling to leave her until she learned the facts in her case, and a sad story it was which she finally drew from the unfortunate's lips. The girl was the eldest of a family of four. Her father had died when she was quite young, leaving her widow penniless and obliged to work hard for the poor maintenance of herself and little ones. Long before it was time to leave school, the eldest daughter was sent from the home where she had been delicately reared and put to work as nurse girl for two small children. After a time she went to the city, where better wages were promised, and had worked hard, denying herself every comfort and dressing poorly that she might have the more to send home. After a time she fell ill from the effects of overwork and the family to whom she had been a most faithful servant heartlessly sent her to the poorhouse and refused to re-engage her after her recovery, as she was not strong enough to do their work. She would not have cared so much, but they had faithfully promised to

take her back, and make some allowance for lost time. From house to house she went, vainly seeking employment; no one wished to employ an invalid, and she would not go home to be a burden upon her mother. At length she found a position where she was promised good pay as second girl, and gladly accepted it. The work was hard, as the family entertained a great deal, but she struggled on until the end of the first month, when she asked for her wages, which had not been paid, and was put off for a few days until the return of the master of the house. On his return the pay was not forthcoming, and week after week she worked and waited. At the end of six months her mother wrote, complaining that she was badly in need of a few dollars and could not understand why she had received none of late. Being in ignorance of her daughter's late illness, she chided her for neglect. Once more the poor girl begged for her pay, and showed her mother's letter. Her mistress appeared deeply touched, said she regretted being unable to comply with her request on the spot, but promised a payment in two days. A week passed, another pleading letter came from home which grieved her sadly, for she had not received a cent. Her mistress was dressing for the opera, and with tears in her eyes she went to her, only to be sent away with a few smooth-sounding words and told to wait until tomorrow, as the carriage was at the door and she had no time to figure up accounts. She then gave a few orders in regard to putting away the things she had left scattered about the room, and haughtily descended the stairs. The poor girl threw herself upon her mistress's couch and wept. Suddenly remembering that she had work to do, she set about it, and in a drawer which she opened to put away some small articles, she came upon a purse. Curious to know whether her mistress had in her possession the wherewith to pay her, the girl opened the purse and counted thirty dollars, far less than the amount justly due her. Thoughts of her mother and the little ones at home suddenly rushed upon her, and with them the memory of how she had been put off from time to time with false promises. She held the bills firmly clasped in her hands, intending to put them back, but the temptation was too strong, and with a feeling that she was only taking her own, she hastened from the room, and wrote to her mother, enclosing the entire sum in the envelope, with the intention of sending it early in the morning. Driven to desperation by disappointment, she had not stopped to consider the boldness of her act and fell into a slumber, from which she did not awake until her angry mistress, who on her return from the theatre had missed her money, came to her for an explanation. The money and letter were found on her table, and her arrest quickly followed. "Poor girl," said Cecelia, after hearing the story; "I am indeed sorry for you, but you should not have taken your mistress's money." "My mistress should have paid me, but I am sure she never intended to. It is very easy for such as you to talk but put yourself in my place." "It does not seem possible she intended cheating you out of it." "I wish I could believe as you do, miss, and there was a time when I could, but I have lost all faith in such people. If she had been the good woman she pretended to be, she would never have had me arrested." Cecelia's tender heart was deeply touched and she wished that it was in her power to help the girl. On inquiring the name of her former mistress she was surprised to learn that she was a woman she knew well by reputation as being connected with numerous public charities. "And what do you intend doing now?" asked Cecelia. "Surely when you tell your story you ought to be freed, or at most get a light sentence." "Freed," she said bitterly, "I have no such hopes. The evidence against me is too strong, and I can only pay the penalty by long imprisonment." "But when they near your story you surely cannot be blamed." "My story may not be listened to, or it may be sneered at, for I am only a poor working girl, while my

accuser has wealth and position on her side." Cecelia believed the girl's story in every detail, but all she could do was to speak a few consoling words and await the result of the trial. It was just as the prisoner had feared. A verdict of guilty was quickly brought about, with a sentence of eighteen months' imprisonment. "My poor mother," was all the girl could say, when Cecelia called on her. "I can never live through it, and I know it would kill her if she knew, for ours has always been a proud and respectable family." Her time was not served out; at the end of six months her health had so completely failed that she was pardoned and sent home, where she soon died. The proud, mean woman who had been the cause of it all never took the trouble to learn what had become of her victim, but went on as before, enjoying life to the best of her abilities and continuing her works of public charity, by which she won applause for herself from a fashionable world. This was only one of the sad examples of human misery and suffering brought before the tender heart of Cecelia, but each had its new interest for her, and if, perchance, she found among the prisoners many hard-hearted wretches who were evil by their very natures, it did not cause her to feel less for those deserving of her pity. For one thing she earnestly thanked God, and that was that none belonging to her were within those prison walls. In the humility she had been accustomed to practice all her life, and which as yet had met no severe trial, Cecelia realized not the pride this feeling covered, and she never stopped to consider how she would really feel if such a sad misfortune were true. It is easy enough to think how others should bear the burdens placed upon them, but when we ourselves are called upon to suffer in a like manner, things are viewed in a different light. It was about three weeks after the fire described in the preceding chapter when our heroine was met one morning after Mass by the warden, who informed her that the incendiary who had started the fire had been brought in the night before and was now locked in one of the most desolate cells. A shudder of horror passed over her, for it recalled to mind that one terrible night. She could not help feeling a little curious to see the accused, but it was a week before her wish was granted; then she was allowed to look at him only through the bars, and was quite annoyed to notice that he stared at her most intently. He was a man of about fifty, or perhaps much less, and still bore marks of having once been fine looking, but now his hardened face proved him to be every inch a criminal. His name, she learned, was Charles Coon. Aside from the interest she took in him as being the cause of the awful scene she had witnessed, she gave him little more thought, until informed that he had made inquiries concerning her, and wished to have her visit to him. In this she saw nothing unusual, as with the Sisters she had often been asked to visit different prisoners. In company with Agnes she was admitted to the lonely cell. The occupant was pacing up and down, gazing vacantly at the floor, but he stopped suddenly, and his cold, hard face brightened when he saw her. "I have been told, sir, that you wished to see me." "Yes, I did speak to the warden about having you call when you visited the prison again." "I am at your service if there is anything I can do for you." He looked sadly from one girl to the other, and Cecelia thought that a stray tear trembled on his eyelid. "There is a great deal you can do," he said, then hesitated. "Your companion here, your sister, no doubt." It was a strange remark, and stranger still the tone in which he said it. "My cousin," said Cecelia. "Yes; I see there is a strong resemblance." He did not say to whom, and the girls, thinking he meant the resemblance was between them, were surprised, for there could be no greater difference than that between the two cousins. "Perhaps I have done wrong in bringing two young ladies like your-

self into my dreary cell, and I know that I am unfit company for such as you after the hard life I have led; but I once had a kind and loving mother, and two sisters, and you, Miss Daton, reminded me so much of them that I wished to see you again." "Was that why you sent for me?" asked Cecelia. "Yes, and if I have done wrong by thus imposing upon you, I hope you will pardon me and I shall not trouble you again." Both girls were silent, but from different motives. Agnes was insulted to have such a character say that she and her cousin reminded him of any one connected with him, but Cecelia caught a glimpse of the better nature of the man before her. "You have done us no wrong," said Cecelia; "I am only too happy to be of service to one who is suffering." "The word suffering, child, does not express the terrible anguish that fills the heart of the guilty criminal; but you may go now, for I am not fit to have two such angels in my presence. And may God bless you both." It was the first prayer he had uttered for years, and he felt better for that as well as happier in the memory of Cecelia's sweet smile and kind words. Agnes showed evidence of vexation as they passed from one ward to another, but Cecelia was unusually bright and talkative. When they were outside, Agnes gave vent to her feelings in these words: "Cecelia, did you ever hear of such presumption?" "What do you mean, Agnes?" "That low fellow dared to say that we reminded him of his sisters, and you did not resent it." "Be careful of what you say, for you know not but that his family may be as good as ours. At any rate, he has a human heart." "A human heart! How can you say so, Cecelia, knowing as you do what he has done? You surely cannot fully understand the nature of his crime. Think of the loss of life and property that fire caused." "Understand it, Agnes! How can I help understanding, when I was in the very midst of it, and witnessed it all. Do you think I could forget so terrible an experience this soon?" "You seem to forget when you can speak kindly of him who caused it." "Agnes, you have no positive proof of his guilt and should not judge too hastily." "Everything points strongly against him. How can you doubt his guilt?" "Public opinion often errs, especially when fortune frowns on a man and we must not be too harsh, for I believe there is some good in his nature." "For your sake I wish I could agree with you, but he is too suspicious a looking character for me to care to meet again." "You are not obliged to if you do not wish." "Do you intend visiting him again?" "I do. If I can be of any service to him I shall feel that my time has not been spent in vain." "I wish you success," laughed Agnes, "though, to speak plainly, I think you often carry your charities too far, and it is very imprudent for you to take so much notice of such people." "Better err in showing too much than too little charity, and I repeat, I firmly believe there is something in that man we cannot understand." CHAPTER XVII. "Cecelia, please come to my room, I wish to talk with you," said grandmother one afternoon about six weeks after the fire. "Yes, grandma," answered the girl with a pleasant smile, puzzled to know the meaning of the strange expression on her grandmother's face. The woman moved nervously about the room for a few minutes, closely watched by Cecelia; then sat down and looked her young companion full in the face. "Cecelia," she said at length, "do you really believe that the Catholic Church is the only true Church?" "Yes, grandma, I certainly do." "And outside of it none can be saved?"

"That is my firm belief." "What, then, do you suppose is the fate of hundreds of good people who have lived and died outside the Catholic Church? Are they lost simply because they were not members of the Catholic Church?" "Certainly not, grandma." "And still you have just told me that outside the Church none can be saved. You have contradicted yourself." "It may sound like a contradiction, grandma, but it is not. 'Out of the pale of the Church there is no salvation' simply means that we are obliged, under pain of incurring mortal sin, to believe and practice the true religion (which is the Catholic religion) when once it is in our power to do so. That means that we sin, and consequently lose our souls, if we voluntarily reject the truth when it is shown to us. A Protestant is not lost simply because he is a Protestant. If he is in good faith in his error, that is, if he has never had the opportunity, from one reason or another, of knowing and embracing the Catholic faith, he is considered by the Church as making one of her children; and if he has lived according to what he has believed to be the true law of God, he will have the same claim for joys of heaven as if he were a Catholic." "Do you really believe all that, Cecelia?" "I certainly do, grandma; did you ever know me to be guilty of falsehood?" "Never, Cecelia, never, and I hope you will forgive me if I appeared to doubt you. I did not mean it." For some minutes Mrs. Daton sat in silent reflection, and Cecelia would not interrupt her. She had had many a serious talk with her grandmother on the subject of religion, but since the fire it had never once been mentioned between them, and now there was something so different in her manner that Cecelia was at a loss what to think. At length she spoke again. "I understood you to say," she said, vacantly, as if to herself, "that those outside the Church who have a chance to learn its teachings and do not become members of it cannot be saved. Am I right?" "Yes, grandma," said the girl, in a trembling tone, as if fearing to pronounce an anathema on one she dearly loved. But she must speak the truth. "Then, if I remain in my present state I fear I am lost." Cecelia's heart beat high with joy at this announcement, but she dared not betray her feelings. In a voice that was wonderfully calm under the circumstances she remarked: "Why do you think so, grandma?" "Because I have been fully convinced of the truth of your religion." "Since when, grandma?" "I cannot tell you; the conviction has been gradually coming for a long time." "And you never told me before?" "How could I? My pride forbade it; I was unwilling to acknowledge that I had been wrong in my belief." "Grandma," said Cecelia, in a tone of gentle reproach, "do you think that was wholly right?" From another this question might have been considered impertinent by so proud and self-willed a woman, but the wonderful power of love Cecelia held over her could melt her pride as nothing else could. The words so sweetly spoken, instead of angering, humiliated her the more, and she longed to throw herself into the arms of her grandchild and weep tears of repentance for her stubbornness in refusing to acknowledge the truth. "I know, Cecelia, that I have done wrong, and I am sorry for it now, and with your kind assistance I am resolved to delay no longer my entrance into the Catholic Church." "You are really in earnest, grandma?" "Yes, I am. For many months I have suffered a struggle, no mortal knows how bitter, between what you call grace and my own pride. It is a difficult thing for a woman of my age to renounce in the face of the world, the principles to which she has clung from childhood and embrace a far different religion, and that religion one she has ever claimed to despise." "Better so, grandma, than to be obliged to stand before your judge at the last day and be accused of neglecting the graces sent you."

"You are a noble girl, Cecelia, and it puts me to shame to see one so young show signs of an intellect so far superior to my own." "I cannot see it that way, grandma, for I only make an effort to do, to the best of my ability, what I believe is right, and I am pained to know that I myself am very weak in many things." "You have never shown it, child, you have never shown it, for almost from your infancy you have been to me more like a woman of superior intellect and strength of character. I have often wondered from whom you have inherited it all. You often seemed not to belong to us." "You overestimate my value, grandma," said Cecelia, blushing. "Not at all, child. Your good example it was that first caused me to believe there might be some truth in the religion you so dearly loved. When you were a child it grieved me sadly to see you, my darling, being brought up in a creed I hated and considered wholly unfit for you, and many times I was strongly tempted to interfere. But I made a resolution which cost me dear—never to have anything to say to my son's wife about the training of her children. I hoped, however, and earnestly prayed that when you were old enough to choose for yourself you might renounce the Catholic religion and become a good Protestant. I cared little in what denomination, but of course, would like to have had you in my own church." "And I prayed for you, too, grandma, that God might enlighten you and teach you to know the right." "How long since you commenced praying for me, Cecelia?" "Since my seventh birthday, grandma; do you remember that and the conversation we had when I was about to lay aside the white and blue?" "Remember it I do, distinctly; but you were so young then I thought you had long since forgotten it." "No, grandma, my memory is not so poor as that. It left too deep an impression on my childish mind, and I am not afraid to tell you what I never before mentioned, that the discovery of the difference in our religion was my first sorrow. Do you remember how I promised to say 'Hail Mary' for you every day?" "I remember that distinctly, and I have not forgotten how hard it was to control my anger, not toward my darling, but toward those who had taught her what I considered such foolish idolatry." "Oh, grandma, this is too much," interrupted Cecelia, smiling; "our Church is very strongly opposed to idolatry." "I understand it now; you have made that point very clear to me, but I beg to apologize on the plea that I was not wholly to blame for the errors of my early training. Your good prayers and beautiful example have conquered, and I thank God for it." "Good example! What have I ever done to merit such praise?" "Many things, Cecelia; all your life you have been a living example of what a true Christian should be. Your persistence in bringing the priest to this house to visit your aunt during her illness was well worthy of praise, and I fully understood the nobility of your deed at the time, although I would not admit it." "If I remember correctly, grandma, you appeared displeased with me." "It was no mere appearance. It was a reality, for I was angry, very angry at first; but you caused my anger to be changed to respect when I saw how persistent you were in doing what you believed to be right." "I did only what I considered my duty, and asked no praise, as I did not deserve it." "From that time, Cecelia, I have watched you more closely than ever before, and I have not contented myself entirely with the explanations you have given me, but many times when you were unaware of it I have stolen into your own and your aunt's room and have taken your books of devotion and those explaining the Catholic religion to read in secret." Cecelia smiled, for she had missed her books at various times, but had never suspected their real whereabouts. Then you have been studying all this time without letting us know it?"

To be Continued.

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