

THROUGH THORNY PATHS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"Ah," he said, "a memory of childhood days?"

She did not answer. She felt that perhaps she was permitting too much freedom from a stranger, for though she had been for some time with the company, they were still like strangers to her, and she fully intended continuing with them as she had begun. Making an excuse to absent herself, she bowed and left the room.

"A strange character indeed," said Allyn St. Clair to himself, as, still standing by the piano, he noted the queenly bearing with which she disappeared. "Her heart has ever seemed as cold as stone, but the very expression on her face and in her voice as she sang tells me that there is a world of true love in her nature. Would that I might call it forth!"

He turned toward the window, and seeing the book she had forgotten, picked it up and read the title, "Following of Christ." Had he found it elsewhere or had it been the property of another the three gilt words on the cover would have caused him to cast the book from him in disgust. What cared he to know of Christ, who to him was on a par with the gods and goddesses of the pagans. These had been worshipped in the dark ages of the past, but to civilized nations they were now known only in poetry; but the Christ he knew to be worshipped by the vast majority of enlightened people throughout the entire world. He deeply deplored the fact; to him this was the one great weakness of the nations. He had never once stopped to think whether or not Cecelia belonged to any of the popular Christian churches. It was a matter of indifference until he held in his hand the book in which he had found her so deeply absorbed. He leisurely turned over the pages, reading a few words here and there, but they were full of mystery. For half an hour or more he sat, turning the pages, until aroused by a loud rapping at his own door. Out of mere forgetfulness, or because of a hidden notion of grace, he slipped the book into his pocket as he hastened to answer the summons. He had fully intended leaving it where he found it, and had he realized what he was doing he would never have taken it away, for to his honest heart it would have been too much like an act of petty larceny.

The visitor proved to be one of the troupe and his time until evening was entirely taken up, so he thought no more of the book until he unexpectedly found it in his pocket next day. His first impulse was to return it at once with apologies, to the owner, but his curiosity having been aroused by the little he had read, he wished to see more. Accordingly he sat down and read several chapters with deep interest, trying in vain to understand the meaning of the strange words, but for the first time since his early youth he who had been a deep student of the sciences and other things that would have been hard for many to understand found himself deeply puzzled.

"Following of Christ!" he repeated, as he closed the book. "What a fool I am to be wasting my time on such childish superstition. What would my father say if he were alive and could see me? Certainly he would be right in calling me a fool."

The image of Cecelia in all her fresh beauty arose before him, and try as he might he could not banish her.

"It would be wrong to call her a fool," he thought; "but perhaps she does not believe all this book contains. I hope not. She has undoubtedly missed it, however, and I must return it at once."

He went to her room and knocked twice, but no response came, Cecelia and her aunt had gone out. He returned and sat down to continue his reading. The result was that he determined to study the book until he understood at least part of it; he spent all his leisure time with the volume that day, only to remain in darkness. At length, just before the time to go to the theatre in the evening, he heard Cecelia's step in the hall, and following her to the room, offered her the book, with apologies for having taken it.

"Thank you, Mr. St. Clair," she said; "I feared I had lost it, and I prized it very highly as a gift from

a dear teacher who is now dead." After a little hesitation he remarked: "Will you be offended, Miss Daton, if I take the liberty of asking you a question?"

"Certainly not." "Do you believe what that book contains?"

She did not answer at once, but looked straight into his eyes, and that look he never forgot. It was a look of sad astonishment, mingled with deep pity.

"Are you not a Christian?" she asked, reproachfully.

"You mean do I believe in Christ?" "Yes, that is what I mean."

"I must admit that I do not. I have been brought up to believe neither in God nor in any existence after death. I am, in other words, an infidel."

It was an assertion which he had never been proud to make, but with her clear eyes upon him he felt himself a coward for the first time in his life.

"I would never have believed it," she said, in tones of mingled astonishment and sorrow, which proved that she had esteemed him highly. Then she bowed and turned away.

CHAPTER III.

"Are you a Christian?" These words resounded again and again in the heart of the youth of the youth who had openly and proudly denied his God, and they troubled him far more than he would ever have cared to admit. Had the question been asked by another, by a man of learning or even by one of the heads of any church, he would have been proud to assert his disbelief, but from her it was far different, and strongly as he adhered to the false teachings of his father, he would willingly, on the impulse of the moment, have given up all for the happiness of being able to stand before the girl he loved and say with truth, "I am a Christian." Nothing in this life, had been as bitter as the reproach she had given him.

"There must be something good," he thought, "even in a religious superstition which is practised by one of her high morals." He had seen in a faint manner in the little book he had read marks of the life she practised, and on the impulse of the hour he stole away to a book store, where he was unknown, and bought a copy of "The Following of Christ." Returning, he did not try to read, but turned over the leaves in an abstracted mood for a time, then threw aside the book, calling himself a fool for thus wasting his time and money on such a thing.

"Perhaps, after all," he finally concluded, "religion may be good enough for a woman or a weak-minded person, for I must admit that it is possessed of a strange influence which keeps them from doing many a wrong, but to a man of intelligence and strong will power such a thing is all humbug. I firmly believe that many of our church members do not themselves believe in half of what they profess, and if forced to speak the truth they must certainly admit that they are allowing themselves to be made fools of by men who are no better, and in many cases not as good, as themselves."

He laughed a bitter mocking laugh the echo of which came back with a strange sound. He felt a trifle nervous, a weakness of which he was ashamed, and declaring emphatically to himself that it was only the effect of overwork, he took up his hat and went out. Whether he went he cared little, only to get away from himself and his thoughts that were tormenting him. But it was useless. Even in the busy street distraction could not be found. Some distance from the hotel he met Mrs. Cullen and Cecelia, both of whom gave a slight bow of recognition and passed on. The sight of her only disturbed him the more, and he half wished for an opportunity to speak with her and learn from her lips what it really meant to be a Christian.

"Others," he thought, "many others may allow themselves to be led astray by what they know or fear to be a false delusion, but not she, for there is the truest sincerity in her clear, honest eyes and she would never profess what she did not truly believe."

During the weeks which followed Allyn watched his ideal woman, as he called her, more closely than ever

daily finding more in her noble character to admire; but the barrier she built around her was never removed and he found some consolation in the knowledge that not only he but all others were barred from her close friendship. Twice he had ventured to send her flowers, hoping that she might wear some of them on the stage, but a short kind note of thanks had been the only proof that she had received them, and directly afterwards she had greeted him as coldly as ever. His second gift he had found a few hours later on the table of one of the lady singers who had been confined to her room for a few days by illness. She had with glowing features called his attention to Miss Daton's beautiful gift, and told him that the haughty lady who had scarcely deigned to notice her in health now spent an hour or two with her every day and was one of the most pleasant companions as well as a good nurse.

"If that be true I cannot help almost envying you your illness," he said, with a smile that betrayed him.

"Physical suffering is scarcely an enviable thing," said the lady, "but it is certainly a real pleasure to have so pleasant a companion to help pass the lonely hours when you are forced to remain in your room."

Expressing his hope that it might not be long ere Miss — should again be able to take her part in the opera, Allyn took his departure thinking of the new phase he had discovered in Cecelia's character. An hour ago he had rejoiced that he had accepted his flowers and now he had found them in the possession of another, and he had learned that the companionship coldly refused in hours of pleasure and mirth had been freely given to the sufferer. Before he was aware of it he found himself wishing that he might be ill, in order to see if she would grant him the same favor. Sickness, he felt, with her for a nurse, would be little short of real pleasure, but his robust constitution refused to comply with his more than foolish desire.

The events in the life of Allyn St. Clair went on in much the same manner until near the 1st of April, and it is needless to say that Cecelia had not in the least ceased to be the object of his interest. He believed her to be a strict church member, but had taken no trouble to ascertain the particular denomination that claimed her allegiance. In his mind he had associated her at once with some fashionable Protestant church, and there he let the matter drop. It was now the last week of Lent, and according to an old custom of the company, no entertainment was to be given during the entire week. Had they been anywhere near New York he would have spent the vacation with his mother, but they were in a distant city in the far West and sightseeing being but little novelty to one of his wandering profession, time hung heavily.

Not so with Cecelia and her aunt. A whole week's rest was a great treat to them. Rest! But did they rest? They attended Mass each morning and the greater part of the day was spent in prayer and closer seclusion than at other times. On Wednesday morning Cecelia was the recipient of a large bunch of white Easter lilies from Mr. St. Clair, and as they were her favorite flowers, she was overjoyed at the sight of them, but when she stopped to consider how expensive they must have been, she was half inclined to return them. Had they been from another she would have done so without hesitation.

"Is it right for me to accept them, Aunt Nellie?" she asked.

"Use your own judgment in the matter, Cecelia," was the reply. "I can see no positive harm in it."

Mrs. Cullen did not say that, in spite of his having declared himself an infidel, she had ever looked upon the young man as being of superior intellect and a true gentleman at heart, whom she could trust far more than many who called themselves Christians. Besides, she entertained a secret hope that her niece might possibly be instrumental in his conversion. Cecelia sat gazing at the flowers, admiring their delicate loveliness and purity and breathing their sweet perfume, undecided whether to keep them or not. Suddenly a bright light came into her face, and hastily penning a note of sincere thanks she gave it to the messenger.

It was well for her that she was not present when, on receiving her short missive, Allyn questioned the boy and learned how her face had brightened at the sight of his flowers. He at first believed it to be a compliment to himself, and that perhaps she was not entirely indifferent to his devotion; than as an afterthought came the memory of what she had done with his previous gift, and he determined to watch her.

Cecelia in the meantime, instead of filling one of the large vases that adorned her room, carefully replaced the flowers in the box and set them away in a cool place, then returned and took up her Holy Week book to finish reading the Passion from St. Luke. So intent was she upon the sufferings of Our Lord that she heeded nothing until her aunt addressed her.

"Cecelia," she said, "do you wish me to put your flowers in water? They will soon fade if left in the box."

"No, auntie, but you may moisten the stems a little, if you please."

"Why not put them in a vase and put them on the table?"

"Because I have other use for them, and removing them from the box to this heated room for even a short time might cause them to lose some of their beautiful freshness which must be kept until to-morrow."

"For what, Cecelia?"

"Aunt Nellie, can you not guess?"

"No, unless you intend taking them to church."

"That is just it. For myself, Aunt Nellie, I would not think of keeping such beautiful flowers during this sad week. I intend putting them on the altar of the repository to-morrow, and I shall pray that our dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament may send a ray of grace to him who gave them to me."

"A bright thought, Cecelia, and truly a noble one, for I have always felt that there is some hidden good in Mr. St. Clair's nature. We are not to be blamed for the accidents of our education; and had he been brought up differently he might have made a noble Christian."

"Perhaps so, Aunt Nellie; but after we are old enough to know and understand for ourselves, we are not obliged to adhere to any error in which it may have been our misfortune to be brought up."

"True, Cecelia; but it is hard to convince a man of his age and apparent strength will that he is living in error. It is a case much like that of your dear grandma, and the grace of God alone can do it."

Cecelia did not reply, but bowed her head in deep thought. The mention of her grandmother had renewed in her a sad longing for home, which try as she might, she had not been able to overcome. The sacrifice she had made in embracing her present state of life leaned no less heavily upon her to-day than on the day when, trying to hide her tears, she had bade the dear ones good-by; but she would not break her resolution never to utter a word of complaint. Aunt Nellie understood, but would not mention the subject so near her niece's heart because she knew well that Cecelia did not wish her to, so she only breathed a silent prayer for her who was as dear to her as her own child. The separation from those she loved and the great change from her quiet home-life was felt little less keenly by Mrs. Cullen herself, but for the sake of her dear Cecelia she was willing to submit to almost any cross. Now as she gazed on the sweet, sad face of the young girl she prayed as our Redeemer Himself had prayed on that night whose anniversary they had now reached.

"If it be possible let this chalice pass from us, but not our will, dear Lord, but Thine be done."

"Aunt Nellie," said Cecelia, by way of diversion, "how thankful we should be that we are allowed the whole of this blessed week to ourselves."

"Yes, Cecelia, and it is still better to be near a cathedral, where we can see the ceremonies of Holy Thursday carried out in the fullness of their grandeur."

After a frugal lunch in their own room, where no idly critic could take note of their fasting or abstinence, the two ladies started for the Church. Allyn St. Clair, from his window, saw them in the twilight, and did not fail to notice that Cecelia carried the box in which he had

sent his gift of flowers. It was no more than he expected, and he would have been better pleased had she left them in her own room. But he would have the satisfaction of knowing where they went, so hastily taking up his hat he followed at a safe distance until to his great surprise he saw the ladies enter a grand but dimly lighted church. At the door he hesitated, undecided whether to go in or not. A boy of about fourteen, who had just come out, looked sharply at him, and he asked,

"Can you tell me, please, what church this is? I am a stranger here."

"It is the Cathedral," was the reply.

"Catholic," was the reply. "If you are a stranger you might like to see the inside, or perhaps it might be better to wait until the daytime; the priests are in the confessionals this evening and the church is not well lighted. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock they have the blessing of the holy oils and procession of the Blessed Sacrament, which might be interesting to you."

Allyn thanked the boy and asked if there were any objections to strangers going in this evening; that remark about the confessional, which he had been taught to look upon with horror, had aroused his curiosity, especially as Cecelia Daton had gone in.

"You may go in if you wish," said the boy, who knew from his remark that he was not a Catholic. "The doors of our churches are always open," and he went his way with a smile on his face, wondering what interest this fashionably dressed stranger could take in surveying the interior of the church in the semi-darkness.

As the great swinging doors opened before him, it almost seemed to Allyn that he had no right there. In spite of the fact that there were many people in the church, there was a holy stillness which was not without its effect upon him. At one glance he took in everything, but his eyes remained fixed longest on the high altar, before which burned a lamp suspended by a brass chain from the ceiling. The decorations had been removed from this altar, but off to one side some young ladies were decorating a smaller altar with flowers and candelabra. Allyn was profoundly impressed by the silent devotion of the people, most of whom were kneeling, many of them in front of the altars, whilst others were standing or kneeling in long lines near little alcoves arranged at regular intervals along the walls.

Near one of the side altars Mrs. Cullen knelt alone; he looked in vain for Cecelia, until he saw her coming through a doorway leading to the sacristy. He drew back into the shadow, as if fearful that she might see him, but the precaution was not needed; she was apparently oblivious of everything as she knelt in deep adoration before the high altar. At the sound of the grand organ she arose and hastened to the choir gallery, passing so near to him that he might have touched her; but she did not see him, and her voice was soon distinguished among those of the other singers engaged in practice. The rehearsal lasted nearly an hour, and in the meantime Allyn had ample opportunity to look around. Some of the priests had already taken their places in the confessionals and others soon came out. Cecelia had scarcely closed the sacristy door behind her when it reopened to admit a venerable gray-haired father. He knelt in silent prayer before the altar, then arose and walked with tottering steps to one of the alcoves. His example was soon followed by another, a bright-faced young priest, in whose eyes shown the happy innocence of boyhood, mingled with deep thought and sincerity. The lesson contained in the striking dissimilarity from a physical standpoint and similarity from a spiritual standpoint to be found in these two men was not lost to the observant watcher.

Once more the door swung open and this time what Allyn recognized as his own flowers were brought out by a young lady. They were in two large vases, which she placed in a most conspicuous place near the centre of the altar, and he was proud to see how pretty they looked among the profusion of bloom. But

his attention was soon again attracted to the confessionals, where there was an opportunity for his favorite occupation of studying faces. They were surrounded by men and women of all ages and classes. In one place a girl of about sixteen, whose refined look and fashionable dress proved her to be of the wealthier class, knelt close to a woman who wore an old-fashioned and threadbare wrap. So absorbed however, were they in their devotions that neither seemed to take any note of the appearance of the other. It was hard for him to understand the look of eager anxiety on the faces of some of the penitents. It seemed to him that they must be about to perform some unpleasant duty; timid human nature was indeed most plainly depicted on the faces of a few who lingered in their seats hesitating to take their places in the line. Then, there was that look of perfect peace when they came out.

The choir had finished their practice, a few inaudible words followed, then the organ was heard again in its saddest tones, accompanied by a voice he knew so well. The selection was the "Stabat Mater." He had never heard this grand hymn before, and though he could not catch the words, it brought tears to his eyes; notwithstanding, he could not help feeling a little disappointed for never at her very best had Cecelia done so well on the stage, and he wished that the manager could have heard her. But the fair singer was not to be blamed, for now her whole heart was in her words; she was singing now for God and the bright spirits in heaven, regardless of what men might say. On the stage she had sung from a sense of duty, by which she had been obliged to perform an unpleasant task in order to help her father. He did not know until long afterwards from what a saddened heart her songs in public had proceeded, neither did he realize that it could be possible for one so young and talented as herself not to be overjoyed at the words of praise she received wherever the company went.

The organ was closed and now silence reigned, broken at brief intervals by the sound of the drawing of the slides in the confessionals or a faint whispering proceeding from a box nearby. Cecelia had come down from the loft with the others, and after pausing to say a short prayer, at the altar, had taken her place among the penitents, where he could watch her closely. This was more than he had expected, for, despite the apparent happiness of those who had been to confession, he dreaded to think of one so fair and beautiful as she entering an enclosure behind which he had been taught was hidden many a dark secret. He was almost tempted to follow her and protest against her occupying so humiliating a position. Besides, of what sin could she possibly be guilty? Never once did he remove his eyes from the purple curtain which served to screen the penitent, and he was surprised that she remained inside much longer than many others. At last she came out, and peace and joy shone in every line of her face. After another few minutes of prayer at the altar Cecelia joined her aunt, and the two passed reverently out of the Church. St. Clair followed as soon as he deemed it safe to do so. At the door he met a man, whom he accosted, asking for what occasion the choir had been practicing.

"They are to sing at Mass to-morrow and also on Easter," was the reply.

"And the solo last sung; can you tell me when that is to be rendered?"

The "Stabat Mater" is to be sung Friday evening at the Stations of the Cross by a young lady who is a member of the Clinton Opera troupe. She has also consented to assist us all through the week, for which favor we are most grateful, as she has one of the most beautiful voices ever heard in this city."

"The Church is indeed most fortunate to secure her services, but no doubt they had to be well paid for."

"We will understand our good fortune," said the gentleman, who happened to be one of the leaders of the choir, "but her services, which she kindly offered us through our pastor, are given free. She appears to consider it no less an honor to be permitted to sing than we to have her."

(To be Continued.)

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