

St. Cecilia of the Court

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CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Cecilia looked up proudly. 'I never told nobody but you, and I wouldn't let no one else say it. And if I have a Saint's name, then the Saint herself knows I only tell the truth.'

'You do that, little Saint Cecilia, you do that! And, it's a good girl you are!'

Praise from Jim was praise indeed! Cecilia tried to keep from looking too proud, and in the effort, something crept up into her throat, and almost choked her; then something got into her eyes and made two great tears roll down her thin cheeks. No one had ever called her good before. She put out her rough, red little hand, and touched his shabby sleeve. 'I try awful hard to be good, Jim! Honest, I do! I want to be just as good as you!'

'As me!' The strange something seemed to have crept into Jim's throat too! 'I'm hopin' you'll be lots better than that! And you will, for you'll be a woman!'

'I don't want to be a woman! I want to be a man!' The Saint, having gathered from her surroundings the fact that a man's life meant the chance to go into the world and work, and the woman's chance to work and fret and scold and save, felt no craving for a woman's career!

Jim's old cheery laugh rang out! And then he said simply, 'Could you be takin' care of Puddin', if you turn out a man?'

Suddenly, in the light of this question, the enticing attraction of a man's career faded. At all hazards, she must take care of Puddin'! So she saved fate the deciding of her future when she said, 'I won't be a man, Jim, I'll be a woman!'

The thought of being a woman and thus taking care of Puddin', kept her heart from being too heavy, all the rest of the day, while she tidied up the rooms. True, there were only two sticks of wood left to burn, and she shivered and drew the little shawl tightly across her shoulders; she was hungry and the half loaf of bread must be kept for supper. But Puddin' was warm and fed and taken care of, so she drowned the voices of hunger and cold by singing loudly, and the little cripple on the floor below hobbled to the door that he might hear the rich full tones of 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Hark, how the angels sing!'

So she sang until she heard her mother come stumbling up the stairs, and held her breath, and felt thankful that Puddin' wasn't there to feel any of the probable blows; but her mother was too drunk to even strike, and paid no attention to Cecilia at all, only drank stupidly what was left in the bottle, and fell across the bed in the corner.

Then the Saint, clasping her hands until the nails dug into her calloused palms, sank down on her knees by the bed, and sobbed out a prayer. 'Oh, God, I'll be a woman and take care of Puddin', but don't make me a woman like that!'

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMING OF DEATH.

The next morning, Cecilia found it impossible to wake her mother, and get her to go to work; she only grunted out a half inarticulate moan that she was sick. The Saint knew what it meant, so she ate a bit of the remaining bread, and went downstairs, and found in the courtyard the men and women going to work.

'Good morning, Saint Celie!' Mrs. Flynn, going forth to a day's washing had stopped

to shout back at the little Flynns a parting instruction. 'And is your mother gone to work?'

'Not yet,' answered Cecilia briefly.

'I seen her a-comin' in last night,' commented Mrs. Flynn, considerably giving force the fact that she knew the probable state of affairs.

'Did you now?' The Saint drew her lips tightly. 'That shows you ain't blind!' Then she turned her back and crossed to Jim's, but met him on the threshold.

'Ye goin' out, Jim?' Cecilia saw that the usual gleam in the stove was missing, and that Jim had on his good coat.

'I'm going to work, Cecilia.' Jim did not tell her that he had had no breakfast, because his last nickel had gone for bread the day before.

'I didn't know ye had a place to work, Jim!' Into Cecilia's tones crept some of her disappointment that the cheery little shop would be closed, that she couldn't run in and forget her headache.

Jim had the pride of a good workman. 'I can always be gettin' a place—where I am going on the Avenue I could always be workin'.' He noted Cecilia's wistful look around the shop. 'Do you be comin' in to-night when I'm home, I'll be havin' a fire goin' then, I'm thinkin'!'

Cecilia tried all morning not to think of evening, and the fire that Jim would have in the shop. It was so damp and cold! Too cold to linger around the pump, and up in her own room, her mother lay in a drunken stupor, and might any moment awake, and in anger at her own shortcoming, make Cecilia the scapegoat. So she sat down in the hallway, and folded her arms tightly, warming her fingers by the warmth of her body. Mickey Daley, wandering aimlessly by, found her sitting there, and sat down beside her.

'Aain't you in school?' inquired Cecilia cordially.

Mickey ignored the obvious fact that the question was unnecessary, and answered, 'Naw! What's the use?'

'Mickey Daley!' The Saint's tones were very earnest. 'Ain't you ashamed to be talkin' so? It's a fine man ye'll be makin' if you don't know anything!'

Mickey brought forth his most imposing argument. 'My dad he didn't go to school much of any, and ain't he a man?'

'Say, Mickey, when you're grown up, do you want to be livin' here in Planery Court, and be starvin' and freezin' half the time? Or would you rather be livin' in one of them houses way up, where they got lace curtains in the winders, where they eat ice cream when they get up in the morning, and go ridin' in a carriage, and wear kid gloves?' The Saint's imagination could picture no more alluring future.

'Bet your life!' responded Mickey promptly.

'Then you'd better be goin' to school, and learnin' all you can crowd in, then you'll be gettin' there!'

'Ah, go on!' said Mickey doubtfully.

'You will, Mickey; Jim said so!'

Mickey meditatively blew into his hands to warm them, and thought it over briefly. Then he announced decidedly, 'I'm goin' to school, this afternoon.'

'You do that!' responded Cecilia encouragingly.

She watched him as he went across the Court, oblivious to the fact that his toes were peeping out through his shoes, and that his unkempt hair was sticking through the crown of his hat. He even whistled gaily, and the Saint's face brightened as she lis-

tened; she pursed up her own lips and tried to join in the chorus of 'Yankee Doodle' as she turned to go up-stairs. She half hoped that her mother was still asleep, and was relieved when she opened the door to see her still upon the bed as when she left. She picked up the broom, and swept away some imaginery crumbs about the stove, and wished that she had covered over the bits of bread that it might not tempt her. Something in the very silence of the room impressed her, and listening, she missed the heavy breathing that usually marked her mother's drunken sleep. She stepped lightly to the bedside, and still heard nothing, and bending over, she saw her mother's eyes wide open and staring vacantly. Something in the face startled her.

'Ma, are you awake?' she whispered. Then she touched her shoulder.

'Ma, answer me! Are you awake? Are you sick? Tell me!'

Not even an eyelash quivered over the wide eyes of the sleeper.

The Saint stood fascinated, feeling herself stiffen out with dread, and she would have fallen had she not clutched at the foot-board; then pulling herself together with an effort, she drew the coverlet up around her mother's shoulders and stepped softly to the door. There she hesitated a moment, and went back to the mantel, taking from it the empty bottle; with a half fearful glance at the bed, she lifted up the lid of the cold stove, and put the bottle in. Then she went down-stairs and across the Court to Daley's; she remembered that Mrs. Daley had spoken kindly to her, and instinctively she sought her out.

Mrs. Daley was bending over a tub of clothes but wiped her hands as Cecilia entered, and prepared for a chat—then noticed the tense look on the child's face, asked, 'What ails you, child?'

'My mother—I think she's sick. Will you come up?' Even to herself the Saint's voice sounded strained and frightened.

'How was she took?' Even while she asked the question, Mrs. Daley was letting down her tucked-up skirt.

'She wasn't took.' Cecilia never took her startled eyes off of Mrs. Daley's face. 'She ain't got up yet—I just found her.'

Mrs. Daley shut her lips tightly, and started out, sending the listening Mickey after a neighbor. It seemed to her she would never reach the top of the stairs, and when she did, it took but a moment to reach the bedside. She gently passed her hand across Mrs. Sweeney's forehead, and then bent her head until it rested on the bosom of the sleeper; when she lifted her head, her eyes were clouded with a sudden mist of tears. Very tenderly she touched the uplifted lids and with a gentle pressure closed them over the staring eyes, and murmured softly, 'You poor thing! You wasn't ready!—God forgive me for saying it, and take care of you!'

The Saint's thin pinched face seemed even whiter than usual, and her great eyes as deep as those of her mother's, as she put her hand on Mrs. Daley's arm, and asked in an awe-struck whisper, 'Is she dead?'

For a moment there came no answer, then, with a great burst of tenderness as she thought of the little ones at home, Mrs. Daley put her arms, still moist with the suds, around the Saint, and held the rough red head to her bosom as she said, 'Don't you be grievin', darlin'!'

Awed as much by the caress, perhaps, the first one she could remember, as by the presence of death, Cecilia shrank back into the corner by the window, sitting on the soap box that did service as a chair. Her great eyes watched every movement of Mrs. Daley's and the two or three neighbors who had been gathered by Mickey. She saw how gently they straightened the limbs of the sleeper, and how they brushed back the hair from her face; for once, she felt utterly powerless to put forth her hand and help. She felt her cheeks flush hot, although she knew not why, when one of the neighbors brought in a fresh white nightgown and slipped it on the still form on the bed; then another came in with two candles, and, shoving the table around so