

THROUGH THORNY PATHS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

For five long years the woman had suffered from a cancer under her right arm, and twice had she undergone operations only to have the terrible malady return.

Agnes was a little displeased with this, for she did not think it proper to take up too readily with strangers and she did not like the woman's appearance.

"Cecelia," she said when they were alone, "where did you pick her up?"

"On the Church steps," was the reply. "The poor woman is sadly afflicted and needs some one to take an interest in her."

"I think you would do better to be a little more careful in associating with strangers in a place like this. Do you think your mother would approve?"

"I had not thought of that, but I know of no reason why she should object to my showing a little kindness where it is needed. If you do not care to associate with the woman, I see no reason why you should."

Agnes changed the subject at once by telling of the drive they had planned for the morrow, and asked Cecelia if she would go.

"I should like to," said Cecelia, "but there is a large pilgrimage expected to-morrow, and there are to be special devotions which I do not care to miss. Can you not postpone your drive?"

"I suppose so, but the day after to-morrow will be Sunday and we cannot go then, as there would be too little time between dinner and Vespers."

"Make it Monday." "Very well, if you wish; but I am somewhat disappointed and I know the others will be, for our plans were all made."

"Then why not go without me?" "I could not think of such a thing, Cecelia."

The next day, not a little to the displeasure of Agnes, Cecelia gave much of her time to the stranger, acting in the capacity of guide and explaining to her the common devotions of the pilgrims.

At sunset Cecelia took her to a hill called Calvary, there to make the Way of the Cross, but she was obliged to ascend the hill alone, while her weak-ened companion sat at the foot. Sunday evening they were together again and Cecelia was sorry to find the woman suffering more intensely than ever.

The following forenoon she must go back to her home, as her time had expired, and her case seemed utterly hopeless. But still she did not despair. At daybreak Monday Agnes awoke to see her cousin dressed and ready to go out.

"Where are you going, Cecelia?" she asked. "There is to be a Mass for Mrs. L. at half past five, and I am going."

"Go if you wish, but I prefer to rest for two hours. The 8 o'clock Mass is early enough for me. I wish you well, but her case is hopeless, and she would better be thinking of her funeral Mass."

"Agnes, you should be ashamed to talk like that. Nothing is impossible to God, and far greater miracles have been performed here." But Agnes heeded her not, for she was falling asleep.

Mrs. L. had been almost too weak to arise in the morning and the journey to the Church quite exhausted her. Once inside, she could not kneel until it was almost time for the consecration, then Cecelia had to watch her closely, fearing that she would faint. Some mysterious power seemed to sustain her, however, and she even gained sufficient strength

to go forward and receive the bread of life. As she returned to her place her face was much brighter. She remained on her knees without support for nearly half an hour, then as she arose she took Cecelia's arm, whispering:

"It is gone, I am cured!" "Thank God," murmured Cecelia, "your faith has been rewarded."

In silence they returned to the boarding house, for the hearts of both were too full to speak. It was Cecelia who whispered the good news to Agnes, who had just arisen, but she refused to believe it until she saw the woman. The cure was already being rumored about, and by the time Cecelia and the woman had finished their breakfast and were ready to return to the church for their thanksgiving many were talking of Agnes, who had just arisen, but she refused to believe it until she saw the woman.

Her heart overflowing with gratitude to Almighty God, and showering blessings upon Cecelia for her kindness, the woman left on an early train.

"Well, Cecelia," said Agnes, when the former returned from the depot, "now that your charge is gone perhaps you will be willing to give your cousin a little of your time by accompanying us on our drive in the country."

"I shall be delighted to go, but, Agnes, the miracle I have had the happiness of witnessing doubly rewards me for the little trouble I have had. It was worth coming all the distance from home to see."

"I suppose that but for your kindness in instructing her what to do she would probably have gone home uncured, so you should be happy."

"Agnes Cullen, you ought to be ashamed to make such a remark as that. It is I who have been greatly privileged in being permitted to be with her when she received so great a blessing."

Just then one of the ladies came in to announce that the carriage would be ready at 1 o'clock.

The drive, which extended along the river road, was a most delightful one. The scenery was such as would have enraptured the heart of an artist. They stopped a half an hour at a place where a narrow stream leaped over a rocky precipice about two hundred feet high and fell into a broad basin of clear water. Gradually the basin narrowed into a stream. Following the course of the stream, they came to a pretty park of small cedars which surpassed in beauty anything that could have been laid out by human hands.

They next visited a little village nearby, but no imposing structure met their view here, for everything spoke of poverty. Some of the old white stone farmhouses had stood over a hundred years and had once been occupied by the grand parents and great-grandparents of the present generation. These simple people cared for nothing better than what had been the earthly possessions of those who for many years had slept beneath the shadow of the rude wooden crosses in the churchyard. The old church itself, said to have withstood the storms of nearly two centuries, was next visited, and then they were again on the road to the main object of Agnes' interest.

The foot of the mountain was reached at last, and the carriage halted at a gate where they read the sign "No admittance."

"To where does this road lead?" asked Cecelia. "This is the summer home of the Jesuits," said the driver, "and there is a chapel over a hundred years old on the other side of the woods."

"How I would like to visit it," said Agnes, looking wistfully at the sign; "but I see we can go no further."

"You may," said the driver. "But the sign says 'No admittance,'" said Agnes. "That means that we are not allowed to drive in; but you have the privilege of going in and walking through the grounds."

In perfect confidence the four young ladies, with the assurance so characteristic of Americans, walked up the long drive, which was bounded on one side by fields of golden grain extending to the river banks and on the other side by a dense forest which hid the pretty spot beyond. After walking fully a quarter of a mile, Agnes halted and looked around saying:

"I believe that driver was fooling us, and that there is nothing to be seen in this wild country. Let us go back."

"There must be something beyond this wood," said Cecelia, "for the road shows signs of much travel; besides, what object could he have in deceiving us?"

A little further on they came upon a clearing and saw a long, low building of the same white stone used so much in that section, and just beyond, on the edge of a forest of tall evergreens, stood a little chapel. There was nothing of beauty about the buildings, but their antiquity made them interesting, and to add to the attractiveness was a row of old-fashioned cannon beside the chapel, a reminder of war long past. They had scarcely reached the house when two nuns attired in pure white came out and, without noticing the strangers, went to the chapel, which they entered. Just then an elderly man in a black cassock and wearing a scarlet cap, with a line of red showing just beneath his Roman collar, emerged from the chapel, and for a few moments gazed in silence on the intruders, then without a word he entered the house.

Undaunted, the ladies followed the nuns into the chapel, where their devotion, I fear, was surpassed by their curiosity. On coming out, Agnes expressed a desire to see the interior of the house. She rapped several times at the side of an open door, and, receiving no reply, stepped in, followed by one companion, just as the ecclesiastic had seen came to meet them, with something like a frown on his face, which was, however, too kind to show much anger.

"Do you know these strictly private grounds?" he asked, trying to be stern. Agnes stammered an apology, repeating what they had been told by their driver. She was asked if she had not read the sign at the gate.

"Yes, father," was the reply, "but we were told that it was meant for carriages, not for pedestrians." "Your driver had no right to send you here. No one is allowed inside these grounds without special permission from the superior."

So saying he abruptly left the room before anyone could offer a further apology. Cecelia would have made a hasty retreat, but the others lingered, and the reverend gentleman, as if regretting having shown discourtesy to strangers who were here through no fault of their own, returned and said:

"Since you are here, ladies, I will show you through the grounds." The party gratefully accepted the offer and followed their guide, who led them past the chapel, stopping to call their attention to the cannon, relics of a war of a century and a quarter back, which had been presented to the Bishop as a slight recompense for valiant services rendered by seminarians who had suspended their ecclesiastical studies to aid their country in her hour of trial. At the end of a long walk through the park he pointed out a pretty shrine of the Blessed Virgin, but took them to it through another winding path, explaining that each evening at 6 the priests commenced the recitation of the Rosary at Mary's shrine walking through the different paths and finishing at a similar shrine of St. Joseph which he pointed out in the distance.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Cecelia, and she wished that she might remain forever in such a holy spot as this; the very air seemed to breathe nothing but sweetness and the pure love of God. Almost at their feet the squirrels peered curiously at them, evidencing little or no fear, and the birds were singing merrily in the trees. They had now reached a clearing at the bank of the river, and here they met a young priest devoutly reading his office. He respectfully raised his hat to the elder clergyman and passed on, while the ladies paused to view this beautiful scene. Only a rustic railing separated them from the edge of a rocky cliff extending down to the waters of the mighty river, which at that point assumed the proportions of a lake. Directly in front of them was the end of a long, narrow island, dotted with golden fields and forests just beginning to take on the autumn hues. Not more than a quarter of a mile away the mountain which had attracted Agnes to this spot descended abruptly into

the stream, and the late afternoon sun shining over it all sent a long ray of golden light across the river and gave the whole scene a most beautiful aspect.

"Oh, earth how like to heaven, if not preferred more justly," murmured Cecelia, forgetful for the moment that she was not alone.

The clergyman smiled and inquired: "Do you mean to compare this to the Garden of Eden?"

"It gives me some faint idea of what it might have been."

"A truly noble soul, whoever she is," thought the clergyman. But there was something else in her that strangely attracted him; now he had made a discovery of something unseen before. Her hand was resting on the railing, and he saw entwined around her finger a serpent with emerald eyes which glittered in the sunlight. Her face at the first glance had been strangely familiar to him in every feature excepting the dark eyes and hair, but he had thought little of it until his eyes fell upon the ring, the like of which he had seen but once before.

"Pardon me, miss," he said, "but what a strange design for a ring. A cousin of mine had one like it when I was a young man."

"It is very old," said Cecelia; "my grandmother's engagement ring."

He looked at her face, and again at the ring.

"Do not consider me too inquisitive if I ask if it is an American ring?" "Grandfather brought it from Egypt to Ireland and gave it to grandmother."

"May I see it, please?" "Certainly, father," and removing it she put in in his hand. He looked inside and read, "From Edward to Agnes," and she felt that his hand was very cold when he handed it back with thanks.

As they moved on he seemed to be thinking deeply, and she felt that his eyes were constantly upon her. But few words were spoken until they returned to the entrance of the grounds. A party of happy young seminarians were singing merrily to an accompaniment on a piano in the house. They ceased long enough to pay their respects to the ladies' venerable guide, but he scarcely noticed them. After the ladies had thanked him for his kindness he turned to Cecelia, remarking:

"May I ask your name and residence?" "Cecelia Daton, of Boston," was the reply.

"Pardon my unseemly curiosity, but I would like to know the maiden name of your grandmother, whose ring you wear."

"Agnes Conlin," replied Cecelia, greatly puzzled to know why this stranger whom she had never before seen or heard of, should be so interested.

"Do you expect to remain long in this section, Miss Daton?" "About two weeks; then we intend to spend a few days in the city of A— on our way home. We have heard so much about the grand churches and convents that we cannot return without seeing them."

He smiled, for she had referred to the pride of his heart. Taking from his pocket a card, he wrote on it a few words of Latin and handed it to her, saying:

"When you come to A—I wish to have you call at the Archbishop's palace and present this card. I prefer to see you alone, as I have something of importance to tell you."

"Well, Cecelia," said Agnes, on their way back to the carriage, "it is wonderful how you can make friends among those people. I would like to know why that strange priest wishes to see you, and alone, too."

"I cannot imagine," said Cecelia, "but he undoubtedly has some good reason, and as for his being only a priest, I have my doubts."

"Why, Cecelia?" "Because priests are not supposed to wear scarlet."

"Who do you suppose he can be?" "Some high dignitary of the Church, no doubt. I should not be surprised if he were the Archbishop himself."

"How highly honored you are to be favored with a private interview! I am very curious to know the meaning of it."

"I must admit I am myself; but time will tell."

Cecelia's first act on arriving in the city was to report at the residence of the Archbishop, and Agnes,

who would not be left entirely behind accompanied her as far as the palace and then went into the Cathedral to wait for her. On looking at the card the porter showed her into a small but prettily furnished parlor, and she was given fully ten minutes to admire a few large and beautiful works of sacred art on the walls. She knew well that she was in a public reception room and was wishing that Agnes, who was also a lover of beauty, was with her, when the door softly opened and she found herself in the presence of the dignitary for whom she had been waiting. He smiled kindly upon her, but she was a little awed when she saw her suspicions confirmed by his cassock of purple and red and the seal-ring and pectoral cross he wore.

"Well, child," he said, after giving her a kindly greeting, "you did not come here, I suppose, with expectations of meeting Archbishop Conlin himself."

"I could not have hoped for such an honor, your Grace," she said, humbly.

He smiled again, a kind smile which seemed to melt all of the stern dignity of his lofty position and made her feel that she had found a friend.

"No doubt you are very anxious to know why I wished you to call. When you told me that you were Cecelia Daton, the granddaughter of Agnes Conlin, I became interested in you, and wished to know about your family. Do you know anything about your grandmother or her family?"

"Very little, your Grace, for grandmother died when father was an infant and he had no one to tell him much about her."

"Ah, I see," was the sad reply, "it is what I might have expected. Your father, like yourself, I suppose, is a Catholic?"

"I am sorry to say that he is not."

"What church does he attend?" "He was brought up a Presbyterian but is now a member of no church."

The old man bowed his head sadly and Cecelia thought she saw a tear in his eye as he said, more to himself than her: "I might have expected it," then added: "How came you to be a Catholic?"

"My mother is a Catholic, your Grace."

"And your father should be, for he had a Catholic mother and was himself baptized in infancy."

She looked at him in surprise. "I never heard of it."

"I am not surprised at that, for the secret went to the grave with your grandmother."

"My father baptized a Catholic! Can it be possible?" "It is the truth, for I myself baptized him when I prepared his young mother for death over fifty years ago."

"You," she said reverently. "You knew my grandmother, then?" "Your grandmother and myself were first cousins, but more like brother and sister when we were young."

Cecelia tried to speak but she could not; the revelation had made her heart too full of joy. Only one thing was necessary to complete her happiness and that was the presence of her father, whom she felt were he here now could easily be won to his true place in the Catholic Church.

"You are surprised, my child, I see," said the prelate kindly. "Yes, and a joyful surprise it is to me, but oh, if father were only here. How happy he would be to learn about his own mother."

"For fifty years, Cecelia, I have remembered your father in my daily Mass, and earth could give me no greater pleasure than to see him and know that he is a good Catholic before I die. But you, dear child, I know that I can trust you to carry him my messages with my blessing."

"I will most gladly do it, and perhaps when I tell him about you he may come to see you."

"If he only would it would greatly cheer the heart of an old man who may be very near to his grave."

Knowing from her sincere, open countenance that she was one to be trusted, the aged ecclesiastic told Cecelia the whole story of the early life, unfortunate marriage and death of her grandmother, explaining in every detail the scenes in the sick room when the young wife received the consolations of her religion without her husband's knowledge. It did

him good to see that by his words his visitor was moved to tears.

"Poor grandmother," she murmured, "how sad the ending of her young life."

"Yes, child, but it was well that she died when she did, a few days after I left her, for she undoubtedly had a happy death and was spared what might have been many years of suffering and remorse for her one act of youthful folly. But you have not told me are there any other children in your family besides yourself?"

"I am the only one living. There were three more, but they died before I was born."

"The last of the family; and your father I suppose, has great hopes of you?"

"He has had," said Cecelia, dropping her eyes, "but in me he seems doomed to disappointment, for failure seems to attend my undertakings in making a choice of work for life."

"How so? You need not fear to tell me, for I am deeply interested in the welfare of a descendant of my favorite cousin."

In a few brief words she told him of her two unsuccessful efforts to become settled in life and of the illness which had brought her here.

"You have had a strange experience, and I suppose that now you will return home and marry this young man?"

"No, your Grace. I have given up all thoughts of marriage, and I really feel that God has called you to my answering the marriage vow."

"What, then, do you intend to do?"

"I do not know; remain at home, I suppose, and settle down to be what is called an old maid."

The old man laughed.

"Not a bad idea," he said, "if you really feel that God has called you to it, for many of our despised old maids are doing a far nobler work in life than some of their married sisters. But it seems to me that you are called to a still higher mission."

"Will you please tell me what you mean?" she asked, her face brightening.

"Have you ever thought of returning to the convent?"

"It would hardly seem right after all I have gone through. If I had a true vocation, why could I not have remained when I first entered? And, besides, what would people think if I were to enter the convent again after falling in an attempt to be married?"

"What should you care what the world might think? We are all of us what we are in the eyes of God, and no more. The world seldom judges us aright. You have told me that you cannot marry. Do you think that you ever cared enough for this young gentleman to marry him?"

"I always loved and respected him as a friend, but had it not been for the wishes of my parents and the advice of my confessor, who told me that perhaps it might be best for me to marry, I should never have consented. I thought I might learn to love him as a husband should be loved."

"You are a good girl, and God rewarded your obedience by setting you free at the last moment. Now, do you not think you would be happier in some religious order?"

"Yes, your Grace, I do, but it might be hard to gain admission now."

"Nothing, child, is impossible to God, and such a great blessing is worth a little labor. So do not be discouraged."

Cecelia's face grew bright, and there was a heavenly light in her dark eyes which proved that his words of encouragement were very sweet.

Fifty long years of separation had not wholly effaced from the old man's memory the sweet countenance of one he had once loved, and he now saw the resemblance more strongly than before, for Agnes Conlin had looked like this when happy.

"Cecelia," he said sadly, "there was a time when I hoped that my cousin Agnes would one day be a happy inmate of some convent, and I believe such would have been her blessed lot had not the stranger taken her away. What could be more fitting now than to have the last of her family become a religious? Who knows but that the blessings of the vocation she sacrificed in an hour of foolish pride have descended to the child of the second generation?"

"If it might only be so," said Cecelia. "I should be so happy."

CHAPTER XIII.

"How well our Cecelia looked," said Mrs. Daton when the girl arrived home.

"I am feeling real well, mother, and I had a wonderful amount of good."

"You show it in your face, pleased Maurice will be when you have improved. He often inquired for you during absence."

The bright smile faded from her face.

"Maurice," she said, "I see why he should take such interest in me."

"He does," said Mrs. Daton. "It does not seem strange to me."

"Mother, I told you before away that it was all over before I meant it, and I wish you were refer to that again."

"Stubborn as ever, Cecelia, cannot last, and when the 1st of June are in bloom, I should be surprised to see you wearing bridal wreath."

"If I do, mother, it will be bride of Christ."

"Cecelia, do you mean to still cling to the hope of entering convent, after once leaving it?"

Cecelia did not answer. He came in just then, and she creak from him the wonder which her eagerness to tell her homeward journey so long. With the deepest attention tended to every word of the story when she had finished it went that he was deeply impressed.

"Cecelia, this seems too good to be true," said her mother. "An honor to find a relative celebrated Archbishop of A—I would like to meet him. I would like to learn that my husband received Catholic baptism."

"I should be so happy."

"I should be so happy."