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THROUGH THORNY PATHS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"Unsuited, Cecelia, how do you know you are, when I dare say you do not even know who the young man of my choice is?"

Cecelia smiled, for she had been too intent on her own pious thought to care who might have been chosen as a husband for her, but now her curiosity being aroused, she asked her mother to whom she referred.

"Maurice Carroll," was the reply. "His father, who has been visiting him recently, tells your father that he is growing immensely rich in the West and has to all appearances settled down to be a confirmed old bachelor. He made several inquiries for you, however, and the elder gentleman hinted strongly that you were seldom absent from his mind."

"I am very sorry if he entertains any thought of me, for he will certainly be doomed to disappointment."

"I thought you always greatly admired him, Cecelia?"

"So I did and do still as a true should wish to marry him."

"I admire a man I see no reason why I should wish to marry him."

"Certainly not, Cecelia; but I once thought you possessed a feeling stronger than mere friendship for him, and that his prolonged absence was what weakened it."

"Never, mother; I repeat I always admired him as a friend, but I have never had any thought of marriage, and firmly believe I never shall."

"Foolish girl. I thought that your life on the stage could not help but drive from your mind all thought of entering the convent."

"Far from it, mother. It only strengthened my resolution."

Mrs. Daton was not a little displeased with her daughter's firmness and she determined to leave nothing undone by which to conquer her. Both were silent for a time and Cecelia was the first to speak.

"Mother," she said, "you would like to have me marry Maurice Carroll."

"Nothing could give your father and me any greater happiness, while your grandmother fairly idolizes him."

A triumphant smile crept to her face, for a woman who could resist a good marriage prospect was something far beyond her comprehension, and she believed her daughter to be of no stronger mind than others of her sex.

"If I were to go to the far West with him, what would you say?"

"There is little danger of that, Cecelia. He is expected home soon to remain."

"You know not what might happen to recall him or how long he might be detained, and in that case would it not be hard for you to part with me?"

"We would certainly miss you greatly, Cecelia; but a woman's place is with her husband, and we should have to make the sacrifice."

"You will not be called upon to do that mother, for, as I told you, I am resolved not to marry." But if you can give me up to go far away, with a man, why not give me up to God?"

"Cecelia, this is very distasteful to me and I wish to hear no more of it," said her mother, and the girl knew that for the present the matter must not be again referred to. It saddened her heart to know that her mother's words to-day had differed little from what had been spoken a year ago. How earnestly she had prayed during that year that her mother's heart might be changed, but alas, there seemed to be no hope.

No hope! Is there anything more crushing to human nature than this, and could Cecelia be blamed for the time she was deeply dejected by her disappointment? No hope, she thought, for happiness in this life, for where can happiness be found when we hear a voice within us constantly warning us that we are not in our proper place and God wants us elsewhere? Such a feeling cannot fail to bring with it intense mental agony, for it is too apt to suggest the awful thought of no hope for eternity.

Such was the bitter struggle Cecelia underwent after leaving her mother, and she was too saddened to have recourse even to prayer. She thought of her confessor as one who might offer some words of consolation.

And quiet her aching heart, but on going to find him she was informed that he had just departed on a visit which might last a month. There was no one who could help her; at home the shadows deepened daily, and for the sake of the loved ones who could never understand her suffering she must ever wear a smiling face. Nearly four weeks past thus, and then, just as she was counting the days ere her confessor would return, she was obliged to accompany her mother and Agnes on a six weeks visit to a fashionable summer resort many miles from any Catholic Church.

For the gay woman of fashion and lover of pleasure the place was little short of an earthly paradise. Agnes was very happy, for it was the kind of life she always enjoyed. To her credit, however, let it be said that she missed the happy privilege of attending Mass, and with Cecelia spent two or three hours each Sunday in pious reading and prayer. Mrs. Daton laughed at the girls for this, but so long as she saw them admired and their company sought by the best people, she did not interfere. She would have been far better pleased had Cecelia shown more appreciation of the attention she was receiving, and she would have been most happy could she have recalled to her daughter's face the bright, winning smile she had once worn; but Cecelia seldom smiled now, and strangers who looked at her sweet, sad face suspected some secret sorrow. Dame Grundy, who knows everybody's secrets better than the individuals themselves, whispered that it was probably a disappointment in love. The report came back to Cecelia's ears, causing her new and bitter pain.

On her return home Cecelia hastened once more to the church to lay her troubles before him in whom she had been accustomed to confide and found that he had returned when expected, just after her departure from home, but was now in charge of a parish which had been given him in the most distant part of the diocese. She hastened to write to him, asking his counsel, and day after day for weeks she waited and watched for a reply which never came. At last, impatient with waiting amid the trials which were daily becoming more bitter as the winter season of social gaieties approached, she sought counsel from a stranger. Unfortunately, in her increasing anxieties prayer had been too much neglected, so that now the good father found her in a state of nervous impatience, and could only advise her, to pray earnestly and patiently wait the designs of God's providence.

Cecelia was disappointed, but kneeling before the altar she tried to pray and make herself believe that she had been advised for the best. But the tempter stood before her and told her that she had waited long enough and had been foolish in asking the advice of a stranger who understood not the temptations that surrounded her. She left the church with a firm resolution to act at once upon the impulse of what she believed was right.

Two days later Cecelia was informed by her father that Allyn St. Clair had called on him in the interest of the Clinton's to engage her for another year, and he had invited him to take dinner with them.

"Allyn St. Clair," said Cecelia, "coming here to dinner! I did not think that you would invite a stranger. Does mother know it?"

"No, you are not, if there is any power to prevent it."

"I must, mother, I shall, and very soon, too."

"Cecelia," said her mother, sadly, "how can you be so cruel when you know how much we love you and how we want you here?"

"My first duty I owe to God. I am going."

"What order do you contemplate entering, Cecelia?"

"The Sisters of Charity."

"And spend your life in the hospital doing the hard work of caring for the sick and exposing yourself to every kind of loathsome disease after being so delicately brought up as you have been?"

"Caring for the sick, mother, is a noble work, and one which has God's greatest blessings."

"It is no fit work for you, my girl, and you could never do it."

"I can do it as well as others, and if God calls me to the work He will give me strength."

"None, Cecelia; I left that wholly to yourself to decide."

"And you know what my decision will be?"

"To remain at home, I suppose. You may do as you wish, and you may be pleased to know that I do not need your help, as I did last year. The prospects are growing brighter and I believe that ere long my difficulties will all be settled."

"I am very glad to hear that, father, and I assure you now that I shall never again appear in public."

Allyn St. Clair was greatly disappointed on hearing Cecelia's decision, first because he hoped that travelling with her there might be some chance of winning her, and, secondly, because he knew that she who had won many new laurels for the company last year would help them continue on the road to fame. He informed her that the manager had told him that money was no object and he was to secure her services at any price. But Cecelia remained firm in her determination, notwithstanding that her mother and grandmother, both fully won to the cause, tried to persuade her to accept the offer. Cecelia, who strongly suspected his own personal motive unknown to the others, was very careful not to be alone with him, and felt relieved when her father took him to his own room for an hour's smoke and conversation after dinner. But on taking his departure he found occasion to speak to her.

"You say your decision to remain at home is final?"

"It is," said Cecelia.

"I am very sorry, and I know it will be a great disappointment to Mr. Karsten as well as to me."

"I do not live to disappoint any one, but it cannot be helped."

He held her hand firmly in his and looked at her with an expression which caused her to drop her eyes and feel like tearing herself away.

"Miss Daton," he said, may I have the pleasure of your correspondence?"

"No," she said, in a firm but not unkind tone.

"Good-bye, then, and always remember that if you are ever in need of a friend Allyn St. Clair is at your service."

His manner was extremely sad and she remembered it for many a day with a feeling of deep sympathy, but she showed no sign as she thanked him and said good-bye.

"Cecelia," said Mrs. Daton after he had gone, "I am very much disappointed in you."

"Why, mother?"

"Because you will persist in casting aside every advantage offered for your own welfare. It is no small honor to be associated with such a company as the Clintons, and when you had the chance to make yourself famous you should not treat it with contempt."

"Mother, I have seen enough of public life. You speak of fame as something very essential to happiness. The glitter of it might please us for a time, but how soon it will be all over! And when we are dead what will it avail us that we have been honored for a few years in this world."

"Cecelia, I do wish you would give up your foolish ideas and try to act like other young ladies."

"Mother, I cannot be other than what I am, and I may tell you that I cannot remain longer outside the convent. I feel too strongly that my place is there and I am going."

"No, you are not, if there is any power to prevent it."

"I must, mother, I shall, and very soon, too."

"Cecelia," said her mother, sadly, "how can you be so cruel when you know how much we love you and how we want you here?"

"My first duty I owe to God. I am going."

"What order do you contemplate entering, Cecelia?"

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"And spend your life in the hospital doing the hard work of caring for the sick and exposing yourself to every kind of loathsome disease after being so delicately brought up as you have been?"

"Caring for the sick, mother, is a noble work, and one which has God's greatest blessings."

"It is no fit work for you, my girl, and you could never do it."

"I can do it as well as others, and if God calls me to the work He will give me strength."

"If you will persist in your mad course and go to the convent in spite of all we may say, why not enter the order where you were educated? It is far more suited to you."

"Why that in preference to the Sisters of Charity?"

"Because you meet a better class of people. In the work of refined education you are brought more in contact with those of your own class while the Sisters of Charity have more work among the poor."

"They are thus doing God's noblest work and I do not shrink from it."

"Leave it for those of their own class and show enough appreciation of the many advantages we have given you to allow your mother to choose for you in this."

Cecelia had no intention whatever of departing from the choice she had made, but her mother's entreaties, mingled with her tears, conquered, and in less than a week, much to the displeasure of our heroine, the fact that Cecelia Daton was soon to go to New York to enter a convent of the order by which she had been educated was told and talked of by all her friends and many who were not her true friends. As society continued to gossip about it, poor Cecelia vainly tried to learn who had made public what she held as a sacred secret of her own. She did not know that her own mother had started the report while looking for sympathy among some friends at a meeting of a charitable society.

Not content with the publicity already forced upon her daughter at a time when she wished to be alone, and unnoticed in order to give more time and thought to the great act she was about to perform, Mrs. Daton set to work to prepare a grand farewell reception to take place on the very eve of Cecelia's departure. Against this Mrs. Cullen strongly protested, begging her sister to allow Cecelia to go away quietly, as she should, but Agnes and grandmother, who were no less opposed to the girl's choice than Mrs. Daton herself, fully agreed that the reception would be the proper thing.

On the day of the reception Cecelia dined with the family as usual, but it was noticed that she was very nervous and ate but little; then she went to her own room for a time, after which she was seen to go out. Nothing was thought of her until late in the afternoon. Then it was Agnes who went to her room and found a note bidding them good-bye and stating that she had taken the 3 o'clock train for New York. Mrs. Daton was very angry and would have followed, but it was too late now to recall the one who was gone, and after all her work she must submit to the humiliation of her daughter's absence this evening. Meeting her husband as she left Cecelia's room, she handed him the letter and gave full vent to her feelings in words that were anything but pleasant.

"Poor little Cecelia," he said; "it is too bad she went away as she did, but as her mind was fully made up to go, it seems a day could make little difference, and I can hardly blame her for wishing to go quietly."

He never told that his darling had stopped in his office on her way to the depot and spent half an hour before bidding him a loving farewell. The happy smile on her face as she talked of the life she was about to enter greatly softened the sting of parting, and she had half won from him a promise to become a member of her own faith.

CHAPTER XIII.

Like a bright, sunny day that knows no cloud passed the six months of Cecelia's postulate. Now her time was almost up and she awaited the feast of Our Lord's Ascension, when she would have the happiness of receiving the habit of the order and entering upon her novitiate. At home it had been prophesied that she would not persevere in the order, that when she found how much hard work was to be done she would gladly return to her father's house, which she would then be able to appreciate it as she should.

It was surprising to see how much more she was missed at home this year than last. Then each week brought with it some pleasing story of fame and applause being won, but her victories now were of a far

different nature; they were recorded only on the book of life, and no echo of them came back in flattering accents. Then they were expecting her home from her travels in the spring, but now they foolishly thought that almost any day might bring her home. As her letters continued to be bright and cheerful, stating how very happy she was, they began to give up hope, but could not be entirely reconciled to her absence, for everywhere might be found reminders of Cecelia, and nothing could take the place of her sweet face. In this it was the same at home as it had been to the man in the lonely prison cell who had watched for her coming. Early in May they received an invitation to her reception of the habit, which was to take place in the presence of only the members of the community and a few near relatives of the candidates.

Cecelia had at first felt a little regret that she had not gone to the Sisters of Charity, but in her present happiness it had soon passed away and she now harbored no doubt whatever as to her vocation being to remain where she was. Another lingering regret which had followed her was founded upon her tender sympathy for Allyn St. Clair, whom she knew loved her with the deepest devotion. That feeling had sprung from a tender heart which does not like to see suffering, not from any thought whatever of returning his love. Only once had any hint been given her that she was not in her proper place. She had gone to attend one of the older Sisters, who was suffering from a severe attack of neuralgia, and being unable to give any relief she tried by kind words to soothe the sufferer.

"You have missed your vocation," said the aged nun; "your place is where you can give sympathy."

"Cecelia laughed at the remark, so lightly made, and entirely forgot it for the time, but it recurred to her long afterwards, conveying much meaning."

It was a bright May morning, and Cecelia was awake before the stroke of the first bell, thinking of the happy day so near at hand. The bell sounded, and, waiting not an instant, she hastened to dress. Unloosing her long, shining braids, she let her hair hang loose, just as she had often done for her mother's admiration when at home.

"Only eight days more and that hair will be cut off. It will be a sacrifice, but I can do it for the love of God. Dear mother admired my hair so much I shall send it home to her."

She did not stop to consider that she was wasting precious moments in foolish vanity until the second bell recalled her. Hastily doing up her hair, which seemed greatly inclined to tangle, she covered it with her pestulant's cap and hurried down to the chapel; but the tempter had gained a victory and made her a little late for morning prayers. As she entered the mistress of novices gave her a look of reproach and after Mass sent for her to ask the cause of her tardiness. She was obliged to confess the truth.

"My child," said the Sister, reproachfully, "do you consider such a spirit of vanity fitting for one who is about to receive the habit of the religious? I would not have suspected it of you, especially in the morning, when your first thoughts should be of God."

Blushing deeply Cecelia implored forgiveness and promised to do better in future. The memory of her fault remained with her during the day, but it did not prevent her committing another far more grievous one.

In the afternoon the young lady boarders were going for a long walk and in company with one of the elder Sisters, Cecelia and the other two postulants who were to enter upon their retreat to-morrow were allowed to go with them. Her last act before leaving was to try on two robes which were all ready to be worn at the ceremony of next week. One was her bridal robe, a gown of pearl-white satin, with a long train and deep frills of rich lace which were to be festooned with orange blossoms. It was grandmother's gift and just arrived the day before. It was the last robe she was to wear as a woman of the world. It fitted her perfectly, and a lover of beauty and style would have found it hard to

refrain from telling her how lovely she looked, but her mistress stood before her, a reminder of the one fault of pride, and her face never changed as she looked over the dress, pronounced it all right and bade her take it off. Then she put on the other, the habit with which she was to be invested at her reception, and in her present state of humility she felt that it was far more suited to her than the costly garment of satin and lace. With deep regret she took it off and, donning once more the uniform worn during her probation, hastened to join the girls.

They took a long walk, but to Cecelia it seemed short. She was deeply interested in talking to her companion of the happiness of so soon receiving the habit of the order. As she talked she fairly went into ecstasies, and the good Sister could not help feeling that she was showing too much ardor, but she remained silent and allowed the girl to go on. Cecelia realized it not at the time, but she was displaying pride in the intensity of her feelings and the woman of experience had some misgivings lest it might not last. She was strongly tempted to warn the girl that prudence and calmness were very essential for her, but feeling that it would be useless, remained silent.

They had reached the Protestant cemetery, which, with its wealth of spring flowers, looked its very prettiest, and were about to pass, when one of the girls came back and asked permission to visit the grave of a young lady who had been a boarder at the convent and had died during the winter. The dead girl, though not of their own faith, had been very dear to all, and the request was readily granted. All started for the spot, which was in a remote part of the cemetery.

"Poor little Alice," said Cecelia, "how nice it would be if we could all kneel down and recite the Rosary for her."

"Yes," said her companion, "but let us hope that the innocent child is happy where she needs not our prayers."

With the tenderest care the girls wooed and watered the plants put on the grave by Alice's own mother, then returned to the Sister and asked to be allowed half an hour to go around and see some of the grand monuments. As it was yet early, they were given the privilege, their mistress promising to wait for them where she was. Cecelia remained with her, but the other two postulants accompanied the girls. With the exception of the singing of the birds in the trees and the faint rippling of a fountain near by, not a sound could be heard, and Cecelia whose ardent spirit had subsided with the end of her conversation, was now silently admiring the beauties of nature among the habitations of the dead, when the sound of a man's bitter, agonizing cry reached her ear.

It was such a cry as pierces the heart of the strongest. It was a cry without hope, as coming from the broken heart of one who has lost all, and Cecelia was deeply touched. She firmly clasped the hand of her companion, and looked around to see a man in deep mourning seated at the head of a newly made grave. His back was toward them and his face was buried in his hands, but Cecelia thought there was something familiar in his appearance.

"Some poor man has lost a dear friend," said her companion, "and may God comfort him and help him to bear it."

"I would like to speak to him," said Cecelia.

"I would not," said the other.

"Why not? You know not how much one kind word may cheer him."

"Very little, I fear. Time, not words of kindness, is needed to assuage such grief as his."

"We cannot always tell; a word often goes a long way."

"True, Cecelia, with some people, but remember the man is a stranger."

"Even if he is, are we not all one family in Christ, and would it be charitable to refuse to do good to strangers?"

(To be continued.)