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Through Thorny Paths.

BY MARY ROWENA COTTER.

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Synopsis of Previous Chapters.

Chapter I.—Edward Daton, of America, while visiting in Ireland, falls in love with Agnes Conlin, a poor Catholic girl. Thomas Conlin, Agnes' cousin, who is soon to be ordained a priest notices a serpent ring on her finger and when told it is her engagement ring he tries to persuade her not to marry this Protestant stranger. She, however, refuses and is married by the old parish priest after which they depart for the strangers beautiful home in Boston. Chapter II.—Thomas Conlin is ordained and comes to America as a missionary and arrives at his cousin's home. There he learns that while his cousin has wealth and luxury she was not happy. Her husband had selected a circle in which she was to move and as it was strictly Protestant he said that she might give up her superstitions and become a member of his church. He would not even allow her to attend a Catholic church. She would not gratify him however and when Father Conlin arrived she insisted that he hear her confession and baptize her little baby and she had just been born. Father Conlin goes away with his secret. Agnes dies a week after. Mr. Daton marries again, a rich Protestant woman, and his son is brought up a Protestant. When Edward is eight years old his father dies. Chapter III and IV.—Cecilia O'Kane, an orphan, who lives with her sister Nellie, is engaged by Mrs. Daton as companion. Her step-son, Edward, falls in love with this Catholic girl, Cecilia, and marries her against the wishes of his step-mother. Chapter V.—Cecilia is married eight years and has three children all of whom die and she Mr. Daton are left childless. Chapter VI.—After a lapse of seven and a half years we find Mr. and Mrs. Daton again happy with a daughter, Cecilia, who is about to celebrate her seventh birthday. Chapter VII.—The husband of Nellie O'Kane, now Mrs. Cullen, dies and she is left a widow with one child, Agnes. Mrs. Daton adopts her niece and brings her up with her own daughter. Chapter VIII and IX.—Cecilia and Agnes are sent to a convent school. The grand-mother is very much opposed to this and reproaches her daughter-in-law.

(Continued from last week.)

PART FIRST.

CHAPTER IX.

On her way down stairs Cecilia stepped into the chapel, and kneeling before the altar broke into tears. She wiped them away and gazing fixedly upon the tabernacle said a silent prayer. She asked God to save her father's life, or, if he must die, not to let him go in the state of darkness in which he now was. She promised to give herself entirely to God if her prayer was answered. As she arose from her knees and hastened with her cousin to the carriage a peaceful calm took possession of her and not a tear was visible.

"Good-bye, Agnes," she said; "please pray earnestly for father, and I wish you a happy birthday and want your promise that you will not deny the girls their feast on my account."

"I cannot enjoy it myself, Cecilia, since you have been called away on so sad an errand, but they shall have it all. I shall pray earnestly for your father, and now good-bye, and give every one at home my love."

Mr. Daton was very ill. He had been taken quite suddenly the day before, and when Cecilia was sent for his life had been despaired of. All night the watchers at his bedside feared that the end was near at hand and that if he survived to see his child it would be the limit. Several times he called for Cecilia and could not be quieted until assured that she had been sent for and would soon be home. His wife and mother remained constantly at his bedside. The former was filled with a terrible fear of losing him and prayed earnestly that God might spare him to her, but she never once thought once thought of his soul's salvation or to ask his conversion, so careless had she been in learning the doctrines of her own faith that she believed that having led a good life he was safe, and it was no time now to torment him about a religion he did not understand.

At noon Cecilia arrived and the face of the sick man brightened as she entered the room. Clapping her in his arms he said:

"I knew my darling would come to me, and you will not leave me until I better. How tall you are growing, and you are getting more beautiful every day!"

"Yes, father, I shall remain with you."

"Where is my other little girl? Agnes I mean. Did she come?"

"No, father, only I was sent for."

"It is just as well, perhaps, not to take her away from her studies, though if I thought there were any danger of my dying I should wish to see her, for she has been almost a daughter to me. But I could never love her as I do my own Cecilia."

"You will not die, father; you must not, for I have come home to help take care of you and make you well again."

"All the care I want from you, darling, is for you to remain here so that I may see you. The sight of your sweet face ought to be enough to

cure me."

Cecilia scarcely left her father's bedside for six long weary weeks, excepting when he sent her away to rest or get a little fresh air. His condition in the meantime remained almost unchanged, and it surprised the physicians that he lived so long in such a weakened state. The only nourishment he took was what his daughter gave him. He would some times talk to her until he became exhausted and fell asleep, or he would call on her to read the daily papers, nothing else, for he was interested only in the news of the day. Many times she sought an opportunity of speaking to him on the subject nearest her heart, his soul's salvation, but none came, and she had to content herself for the time being with prayer, and not only by herself, but by Agnes and the Sisters, while novenas were being made, Masses said and lights burned on many altars.

Once in Cecilia's absence the elder Mrs. Daton has suggested to her son that a minister come and pray over him, but he told her plainly that he had never troubled the ministers much in health and he did not care to be troubled by them in sickness. Still she persisted, and he silenced her by informing her that if he ever needed religious consolation he would be content to receive them from the Church to which his child belonged. The old lady was horrified but dared say no more for fear he might carry his threat into execution.

Could Cecilia have heard this she would have felt that perhaps her earnest prayers might not have been wholly lost, but it was scrupulously kept from both herself and her mother.

At last there came a time when the sick man himself began to have fears that he might not recover. His wife had gone out for a walk and he had purposely sent his mother to her room to rest that he might have an opportunity to talk to his child. Taking a bunch of keys from under his pillow, he selected one and said:

"Cecilia, go to my safe and in the little drawer at the top you will find a white plush box, which I wish you to bring to me."

The girl hastened to obey and soon brought back the box, which her father opened. It contained a curl of golden hair and a strange device for a ring. It was a golden serpent, with a pair of emeralds for eyes. Cecilia shuddered slightly as her father slipped on his small finger the little circlet and held it up to view.

"What do you think of it, Cecilia?" he asked.

"It looks like an ill omen," she said, frankly, just as the young seminarian had remarked years before.

"Where did you get it, papa?"

"It is one of the dearest treasures I have, not for its value alone, which is considerable, but it was my mother's engagement ring."

"Grandma's engagement ring! How strange! And why did she not keep it herself?"

"She did, darling," he said, tenderly, for he was about to tell her the secret which he wished no other lips to reveal to her, and had he not really feared that his days were numbered, he would have kept her in ignorance until her education was finished.

"She died until the day of her death."

"What do you mean, father? Please explain."

"Child, the women who brought me up and treated me as a kind mother is not my mother. My own mother died when I was an infant, and father married again soon afterwards, but I always loved my step-mother most tenderly and never knew the difference until my father was on his death-bed, when he told me all."

"Then Mrs. Daton is no more my grandmother than Agnes?"

"No, Cecilia, she is not. Are you sorry?"

"I am afraid I am," said the girl, "for she has always been so kind to me. But tell me about my own grandmother."

Her father told her all he knew, which was very little, but what would have delighted Cecilia he did not tell—that his mother had been a Catholic—for that had been kept from him. Cecilia wept for the fate of the young Irish bride who had died so early and left her babe.

"Poor papa, how sad it must be not to have remembered ever having seen your own mother. Did they tell you how she looked?"

"Yes, Cecilia, and I have her picture if you would like to see it."

"I would, papa, so much; where is it?"

"You will find it in my closet, Cecilia; it is in a large frame wrapped in heavy paper, but you may get it and bring it here."

Cecilia opened the door and drew forth the frame, which she carefully unwrapped, revealing an oil painting of one of the most beautiful of faces.

"How lovely, papa, how lovely she must have been, and how sad for her to die so young!"

"Do you know of any one who resembles her, Cecilia?"

"No, I do not; but Agnes has hair much like hers."

"She has, dear, but that is as far as the resemblance goes. There was another Agnes who would have been just like her had she lived, but there is still another who has her face."

"Who is it, papa?"

"Can you not guess?"

"No never; please tell me."

"Look in the mirror, Cecilia, and you may be able to see the resemblance which I have always seen. True, you have your own mother's hair and eyes, but aside from that you are wholly like your grandmother."

"Do you really think so, papa?"

"I know it; of the canvas is very deceiving."

"Quite an honor, papa, to be told that I resemble her. I see now why it was that so many strangers were puzzled to know who I was like; but why have you kept this beautiful picture hidden all these years?"

"One reason, Cecilia; it was too sacred for the eyes of strangers to be gazing upon, and besides, it did not quite please my stepmother to have the lovely face of her predecessor continually before her. I think you can hardly blame her for that, as it was not her fault that she was far less beautiful."

"But grandma, I mean the one I have always called my grandmother, is good, which is better than beauty."

"Yes, Cecilia, she is good and has ever been the kindest of mothers to me."

"Papa, if you think she will not care too much I would like to hang this picture here in your room. It is too bad to keep such a lovely face hidden."

"Do as you wish, Cecilia," said the man, who was glad to think of having his own mother's sweet face to gaze upon during what he believed to be the last days of his life.

The picture soon displaced one of a landscape at the foot of her father's bed, where he could see it very plainly. The sunlight from the window fell full upon the sweet face, and Cecilia stood back to see the effect. Tears came to the sick man's eyes and he gazed in silence for some time.

"My poor young mother," he said at length; "she must have been very beautiful, and how sad that she had to die so soon and leave her pleasant home. I see her sweet face before me now, for my own little Cecilia is so much like her. It requires only the golden hair and blue eyes to make the image complete."

"I wish I could change them to please you, papa," she laughed.

"I do not, for I like you as you are."

"I am glad you do, as there is no remedy I know of."

"I have drifted from my subject, child; now come here and give me your hand."

Cecilia approached the bed and her father slipped on one of her slender fingers the ring he had just withdrawn from his own.

"I am sorry, Cecilia, if it looks like an ill omen to you, but I wish you to wear it always in memory of your grandmother. My father put it on my finger just before he died, and I never took it off until I had outgrown it, then I put it away to be handed down to my eldest child."

"I will wear it, papa, if you wish, and thank you, but you are not going to die. You must not, for it would break my heart."

"I hope not, for your sake if for no other, for I do not wish to leave you, but I have been ill so long that my case seems hopeless."

Cecilia thought then of how unprepared her father was to die, and she was on the point of speaking to him of spiritual matters when her grandmother entered. The old lady's glance fell at once on the picture, then she looked at Cecilia, who was as dear to her as an own child.

"The girl sprang to her grandmother's side and throwing her arm lovingly around her, said sweetly:

"I know all, dear grandma; papa has told me; but I will love you just the same. I hung that picture up because I knew it would please him."

"You are a good girl, Cecilia, and I do not blame you."

Mr. Daton did not die, but it was many weeks before he fully recovered, and when he did he declared that it was due to the self-sacrifice of his cheerful little daughter. He would hardly trust her out of his sight until she had to return to school, and then it cost him a bitter heart struggle to part with her.

CHAPTER X.

"All dressed ready for my first party, Cecilia. I expected you would be ready first. How slow you are!"

"You must excuse me this time, Agnes, for I am not usually behind time."

"This is a time, Cecilia, above all others when you should not be late."

"Not much danger of my being late; it will be fully an hour yet before the guests begin to arrive, and I cannot tell you how I dread it."

"Dread it, Cecilia? You are a strange girl. This is to be one of the greatest events in our lives, and as for myself, I can hardly wait for the next hour to pass."

"Only another proof, Agnes, of how our dispositions differ."

"I should say so. We are really different in so many ways, but how strange that we two should always be so happy together."

"I see no reason why we should not have been happy. It would be hard for any one to be otherwise where you are near with your winning ways. I often feel that I cannot thank God enough for sending me so loving a sister after my own were taken away."

"It is I, Cecilia, who should be most thankful when I remember that but for the kind charity of your father and mother I should now be a poor factory or office girl instead of a debutante in silk and lace, about to be introduced into society. I appreciate it, even if I seldom mention it."

"Speak not of charity, Agnes. I do not like to hear it. It is enough to know that you are happy in our home."

"I could not be otherwise than happy, for this is a perfect paradise, and never did I feel it more than on my return from boarding school."

Cecilia smiled and looked at her fair cousin, thinking how of her remark than of the admiration she would surely win this evening. Agnes stood before her, rather short in stature and inclined to be a little too plump, said indication being "the bone of her life." She was charmingly attired in a reception gown of pale blue silk, elaborately trimmed with white lace and set off with a set of brilliant sapphires which glittered in the twilight.

From this fair vision Cecilia turned to look at her own loose dressing-sack and plain skirt, but she did not appear to be in any haste to change them.

Six months had elapsed since the girls had graduated with high honors from the convent. Agnes as might be expected, had gone forth into the world as joyfully as she retired from it to enter school, for she was tired of the rules and the laborious duties imposed upon her. Some who are religiously inclined might look upon her as being utterly worldly, but such was not true; deep in her heart she was a truly Christian girl, who was destined to make a good woman of the world.

Her only failing was a too ardent desire for the joys and pleasures of life, and in the naturally innocent heart of a convent-bred girl there was no thought of the dangers which might await her outside.

With Cecilia it had been different. She was happy in the prospect of soon being at home with her parents and grandmother, but she had never realized until toward the end how dear the convent life was to her. Her superior intellect had given her a clearer insight of the ways of the world, and she secretly dreaded coming in contact with it. As long as she could enjoy the quiet of her own home and be free from contact with strangers or purely worldly people she was comparatively happy. Each morning she arose early to attend Mass and once a week approached the holy table. Agnes followed her example for a while, but soon grew lax, complaining that it put too much restraint upon her, and soon contented herself with the Sunday services and occasional weekday Mass and the sacraments once a month and on feast days. This she attended to with the strictest regularity, thus keeping herself in the true path.

(To be continued.)

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