

# THE TWO COUSINS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

## CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"She can't," said Virginia, if she has entered the convent, for no one is allowed to come out after having entered; and only think how sad it is to think of our dear Alexia being shut up there all her life and wearing that horrible dress that will make her look so hideous." She fairly groaned as she said this, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Come, now," said Robert, putting his arm around her, "I do not like to see my wife feeling so badly. I have heard of young ladies leaving the convent after having entered, so our Alexia may come home."

"Do not be so hasty, Virginia," said her mother. "If, as your husband says, she can come home, there is no need of your going for her; for I doubt not but what she will soon return to us and will be glad to become Mrs. Hurley."

"Let us hope so," said Virginia, "but I almost forgot to ask if she left any message for me."

"Yes," said Mrs. Summer, "she left a letter in the top drawer of your dresser. Will I get it?"

"No," said Virginia, who preferred to have no eyes upon her when she read the farewell message. She hastened to her room, where, in the designated place, she found a bulky envelope addressed to herself in the delicate handwriting which she knew so well. How her hand trembled as she broke the seal and withdrew two papers, one a letter, the other a legal document.

"What can this be?" she thought, as she held the letter, then unfolding it she saw that it was a deed which made her the owner of Alexia's beautiful home and the furniture thereof. Virginia was but human, and a thrill of pride took possession of her at the thought that the home she had almost envied her cousin, and had lamented to see closed after the death of her uncle, was to be hers; for pleasant as her own home was, Alexia's was superior to it. When she remembered that the pleasant rooms might never again be brightened by the face she loved, she threw down the paper saying, "I can never go there." The letter in which Alexia bade her farewell and asked her to accept for a wedding gift the home where she hoped she would take up her abode as soon as her return, was a long and affectionate one. While in almost every line was some mark of true cousinly love, she saw but too plainly that Alexia's step had long been premeditated, and she was so happy in leaving home that she feared it would be hard to persuade her to return. Nevertheless Virginia was resolved to go to her to-morrow and try to bring her home.

The united efforts of her husband and parents proved ineffectual in preventing our young friend from starting on what they insisted would be a useless journey, and the autumn leaves were beginning to fall ere she went to Hilton. She had at first firmly refused to live in the home that had been given to her, but when Robert told her that it would be much better to go there for the present than to remain at home with her parents, as she had intended doing for a time, she consented, but it was to be only until Alexia should come.

## CHAPTER VI.

It was a bright October day when the carriage which had brought Virginia from the station stopped in front of the Mercy Convent. "Poor Alexia," sighed the young woman, glancing at the high board fence on either side of the convent grounds and the thorn hedge in front, "how can she content herself shut up in such a gloomy place as this. I am so sorry that I did not come before to take her home." As she entered the grounds and saw that they were strudded with pretty flower-beds and shrubbery, her mental comment was: "It is not so bad after you get inside, but Alexia must go home, for this is no place for her."

Virginia had never realized until her cousin had gone how much she had been to her; but, living where they had spent so many happy hours together, and being alone much of the time while her husband was at his office, she had learned the value of the companionship she had lost, and separation, instead of decreasing, had increased her love for the absent one. But now in a few

minutes she would see her dear Alexia whom she hoped to find unchanged, and how her heart beat with joy at the happy anticipation. Her spirits sank when the portress informed her that Miss Grey was on retreat and she could not see her that day.

"When can I see her," asked Virginia in a tone bordering on impatience.

The portress left her in the pleasant little parlor while she went to consult the Reverend Mother, and Virginia, in the meantime, closely scanned, first the room, then the grounds, as seen from the window, then remembering the smiling countenance and winning manner of the Sister who had just departed, she thought that perhaps the convent might be a happier place than she believed. On her return the Sister told her that the reception of novices was to take place at the convent chapel at eight o'clock the following morning, and invited her to attend, promising that at the close of the ceremony she might see her cousin, who was one of the candidates.

What was meant by the reception of novices Virginia did not know, but not caring to express her ignorance, she thanked the portress and went to find a hotel. Of one thing she felt certain, and that was that the ceremony of tomorrow was to remove her cousin farther from her. The appointed hour found her again at the convent, but this time it was more with a feeling that she had come to bid her cousin farewell than to take her home. This feeling was deepened as she followed the same Sister she had met the afternoon before through the long halls to the chapel, where she was given a seat near the altar.

On any other occasion Virginia Hurley would have taken her seat immediately, but something in the devotion of those around her, and the sanctity that seemed to fill the very atmosphere, impelled her to fall upon her knees, and with bowed head she remained in this position until recalled to herself by the sweet strains of the organ, and the nuns singing the beautiful hymn of the brides of Christ. Light footsteps drew near, and turning toward the centre aisle she saw a little girl in white bearing a crucifix, others carrying the habits of the order, and lastly six young ladies in bridal robes of white satin. Their wavy hair hung loose, and their heads were covered by long white veils, and wreaths of orange blossoms.

Slowly down the aisle the procession moved and knelt at the altar railing to offer their pure hearts to their Creator. Virginia's eyes filled with tears as they rested upon one beloved figure, and never, she thought, had Alexia looked so lovely as in her bridal robes. She could hardly withhold a sigh when she remembered her husband's brother, and thought how happy he would have been to lead this fair bride to the altar. Often since her cousin left home she thought how, on the evening of her own marriage, Alexia had said that she too hoped soon to wear the bridal robes, and in her mind she had chided her for this falsehood, but she understood it all now.

When the candidates arose from their knees Mrs. Hurley took her seat, and during the impressive ceremony remained like one spellbound, only her features changing as she watched every movement, listening attentively to each word spoken by the Bishop and the young women. Now a half smile was visible as she gazed with admiration upon her cousin; then, I must say, something like a frown rested upon her brow when she remembered Andrew Hurley, and the sacrifice her cousin was making; but it soon gave place to an expression of sadness.

Now the bridal train turned to leave the chapel, to cast aside forever their bright worldly robes, and be vested in their new garb of sacrifice. Virginia's admiration deepened when her cousin faced her; then their eyes meeting for the first time, in one brief glance, each seemed to read the innermost soul of the other. On the face of one still lingered a look of inexpressible sadness, while in her heart was a feeling much like that Alexia had experienced, more than two years before, when she felt that Robert Hurley was stealing away her cousin. But Alexia's countenance now beamed with a bright, heavenly light which greatly contrasted with her cousin's face and told that

all was peace and tranquillity within.

Virginia watched them out of sight with a strong inclination to follow, but it was better that she remained where she was, for she would have been wholly unmoved had she seen her cousin, with a gesture of impatience, like one eager to cast aside a troublesome burden, throw back the long shining locks which she herself had so often wished to possess, and submit them to the scissors. When next she saw her the novice's white veil covered the fair head of her who would no longer be known as Alexia Grey.

The beautiful and touching ceremony was over now, and above in the parlor, the cousins were fondly locked in each other's embrace. One bathed in tears, while only a look of sympathy disturbed the tranquillity of the other's face. Alexia, or rather Sister Agnes Bernard, (for this was the name she had received), was the first to speak. "Virginia," she said, "please do not weep, I am so very happy. It grieves me to see you."

"I cannot help it," said the young woman, "when I know that you are lost to me forever."

"No, no, dear cousin," said the young novice, "do not say so, for you are still as dear to me as when we were girls together."

"How can you say so," said Virginia, "after leaving us as you did?"

"As children we can remain together," said Alexia, "but when we grow to womanhood it is but natural for us to leave the home and friends of our childhood and follow our various callings. And Virginia, you should be contented in having so good a husband without wishing for the company of one whose place is elsewhere."

"I cannot feel that your place is here," said Mrs. Hurley sadly, and she paused as if almost ashamed of her efforts to awaken regret in the bosom of her cousin, then continued, "your place is at home, as the wife of Andrew Hurley, who loves you more than life itself."

"No, Virginia," said Alexia, "please do not speak thus, for as much as I esteem him as a friend, our marriage would have brought a life of unhappiness to us both which you would not wish for."

"Impossible," said her cousin, "when he loved you so devotedly."

"Probably so," said Alexia, "but when my heart was here, as it had been for many months before I entered, I could never have returned his affections, so, Virginia, it is far better as it is, for I am very happy. I know that he will get over it, and—" Here the conversation, which had been anything but pleasant to the young novice, was interrupted by the entrance of one of the Sisters, and although Virginia remained until late in the afternoon, Alexia, fearing lest the subject might be resumed, kept some of her companions near her.

When Virginia was ready to go she whispered to her cousin and said, "I almost forgot to tell you that Andrew found your pearl prayer beads in the carriage on the night of my marriage, and he wished me to ask if you wish him to send them to you, or will you let him keep them as a little remembrance."

Alexia had at first greatly lamented the loss of her rosary, which she thought she had dropped in the yard, for the last time she remembered of having it was when Andrew had come upon her hiding place the night of the wedding. After a little pause she asked, "Does he wish them?"

"Yes," said Virginia, "he said he would prize them very highly if he might be allowed to keep them; but would return them if you wished."

"Let him keep them," said Alexia, and in her heart she recommended him to the Queen of the most Holy Rosary, begging her to protect him and give him every happiness for time and eternity.

"Thank you, Alexia, for him," said her cousin.

Virginia's tears flowed afresh as she said good bye; but Alexia, pretending to heed them not, gave her a loving farewell kiss, telling her how much she had enjoyed her visit, and asking her to come often to see her.

"No, Alexia," said the woman who could not hide her feelings, "I can never come here to see you again, but will try to remember you as the dearest companion of my girlhood days."

## CHAPTER VII.

Virginia Hurley kept her promise for five years and a half, for although affectionate letters passed between the cousins, the proud woman would not consent to go to the convent to visit one who, though still very dear to her, had not only left all of her friends, but had also caused her husband to lose his only brother. For Andrew, on hearing that she had received the habit, had returned at once to Europe and had not been heard of since. When Virginia sent her the picture of her baby boy she longed more than ever to see the young mother and child, but at the same time tried to make excuses for her protracted absence, by saying that the baby must keep her at home, and when he was a little older she knew Virginia would come and bring him. Still she kept her unkind promise, and Alexia, hiding her feelings, offered up the cross to obtain blessings for the one who gave it.

She had almost abandoned hopes of meeting her cousin when one morning Virginia, with little Arthur, who was nearly five years old, arrived unexpectedly at the convent.

"You are welcome, Virginia," was all that the Sister could say as she fondly embraced her cousin, then turning to the child who stood looking wonderingly at her, she added, "And this is your baby. Come and kiss me dear," and she bent down to kiss him, but unaccustomed to the black habit of the nuns, he drew back and clung to his mother.

"Yes, this is my boy," said the mother proudly, and as he clung close to her she smilingly added, "but you see he is afraid of you, or rather that dress."

Alexia's smiling face and kind words, however, soon drew him to her side, and while she talked with his mother he sat on her lap, closely examining every detail of the habit of which he had been afraid, and finally, being tired after his long ride in the carriage, he fell asleep with her cross firmly clasped in his hand. In the meantime Mrs. Hurley had withheld even the slightest hint of the bitterness with which she still regarded her cousin's choice. Her conversation had been mostly upon the death of her father, whom she had lost about six months before, and on various topics of interest regarding many of Alexia's old friends; but now she commenced telling of her own married life, which had been like one day of unbroken happiness.

"Robert has always been so kind to me," she said, "and we have been so happy together, especially since we have had our little boy, that I often wonder if Heaven itself could be any brighter."

"I am glad you find life so bright," said the Sister, and her hand rested lovingly upon the shining curls of the child in her arms; but a sad expression flitted across her face as she thought over to her whose lot it had been to learn something of the sorrows as well as the joys of this world, "Alas! will it always be thus?"

Mrs. Hurley's quick eye caught the glance, and mistaking its meaning she burst out impetuously, "Oh, Alexia, you do not know how often we have thought of you and wished that you were as happy as we."

"I ask no greater happiness than I now enjoy," was the Sister's quiet reply.

"Alexia," said her cousin, "how can you say so?" and as she received no reply she continued, "I see how it is with you women. Shut up as you are from the world and all worldly pleasure, you can realize nothing of the happiness to be found outside these walls, and therefore try to content yourself with your lot. Alexia, how can you do it?"

Instead of giving away to impatience, as her high-spirited cousin might have done under like circumstances, Sister Agnes Bernard smiled sweetly and said, "Virginia, you sadly misunderstand us, for there is far more peace and contentment here than the world dreams of, and in what should we find more pleasure than in doing good to others?"

"And in sacrificing all ourselves," said Virginia. "It is uncalled for and unnatural for women to shut themselves up as you have done when there is so much good to be done outside."

"There are plenty outside to do it," said Alexia.

"Yes," was Virginia's reply, "but unfortunately there are few who pos-

sess the true spirit of charity, and among those who would do good many have not the necessary means."

"Unfortunately what you say is but too true," said Sister Agnes Bernard, "and for that reason we Sisters are needed all the more to care for the orphans, the sick, and the unfortunate."

"Undoubtedly you women are doing a good work," said Virginia, "but as I said, it is uncalled for for you to give up all pleasures as you do; God never required of us what man does, and you can do as much good in the world and still not be of the world. Oh, Alexia, if you only knew what human love is, and how much brightness there is in the world, you could never stay here."

"I would not leave here for all the pleasures the world can offer," said Alexia calmly.

"Probably not," said her cousin, a little impatiently, "because you are deceived and made to believe that you are doing right. Poor Alexia, how sorry I am for you. I have so often thought of one great mistake the Bishop made in his sermon the day you received the habit."

"What was it?" asked the Sister, "I heard him say nothing wrong."

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Hurley, in a sympathetic tone, "because you had been made to believe that a bishop could not, or would not err. It was when he said that the home at Nazareth was the first convent and Mary the first nun. How absurd, for Mary mingled among her own people like other women, had a home of her own, and a husband and child to love her, while you know nothing of human love."

Vainly did the young Sister try to turn the conversation into a more pleasing channel, for Virginia, who felt that to persuade her cousin to leave the convent, even now, after having made her profession, would be a very noble work, would not desert her torture.

In tones of the most touching pathos, which would have almost melted the heart of a worldly woman, she told of how, broken-hearted at the loss of the one he loved, her husband's brother had left home. Not for an instant did the calm face of her whose heart had long since been dedicated to her Creator, betray the struggle that was going on within. It was not on account of any regret she felt for the life she had chosen, but heartfelt sympathy for him, and sorrow that she had, though unintentionally, cast a shadow over the life of so noble a man.

At last Virginia said, "Alexia, your heart is too tender to be shut up here, and even though you once scorned the love of a noble-hearted man, I can see but too plainly that you envy me my child; so in spite of all you have done to crush human feeling, you still have a woman's heart." A gleam of triumph crossed the speaker's face as she continued, "Think you not, cousin, that I did not read your thoughts in the look you gave him when I told you how happy I was. I know you too well not to understand the meaning of that look of sadness which you would fain have hidden from me. If you women could realize what it is to be a mother, and enjoy the tender love of a child, you would then know the folly of remaining here."

"Think you not, Virginia," said Alexia smiling, "that we know not what it is to have a mother's heart and feel the love of a child? True we have denied ourselves the pleasure of our own gathered around us in a home which might be pleasant, but the love of the orphan more than recompenses us, and for those poor little ones we have a mother's heart. And now, Virginia, I want to show you my little darling."

Little Arthur was awake now, and putting him gently from her Sister Agnes Bernard left the room, followed by the glance of her cousin, who muttered half aloud, "What a strange character Alexia is. It has always been so hard to understand her, but still she has a wonderful power of making herself loved."

"What is it, mamma?" asked little Arthur.

"Nothing, dear," was Virginia's reply, "I was only thinking of Auntie, for such she had taught him to call her cousin."

Sister Agnes Bernard soon returned leading an angelic little creature, no larger than a child of three, though her face looked much older. A mass of golden curls, tied with a blue ribbon, crowned her pretty white face, and a pair of big blue

eyes seemed to rest upon Virginia when she spoke to her, but a close look revealed that it was only a vacant stare. Alas! the child was blind.

"What a lovely child," exclaimed Mrs. Hurley, "who is she, Alexia, and how came she here?"

"Her name is Agnes Malloy," was the reply, "and she has been with us since she was a year old," but nothing more was said until little Agnes was out of hearing, when Alexia told her sad story, which, alas! is only one of many in every city:

"Five years ago last winter, on a cold stormy night, a young mother had come to the convent and begged for shelter until morning. She did not care so much for herself, she could have slept any where, but her baby was very sick, and she feared the exposure might injure her. Who she was, or whence she came, she declined to tell, and the Superior, seeing how weak she was from cold, and believing that she was withholding some painful secret, declined to question her; neither could they turn her away, although unaccustomed to receive strangers about whom they knew nothing. 'Dear Sister,' she had said in reply to a question as to where her home was, 'I have no place to go, and if you will only let me remain until morning, on my baby's account, I will go away.' In the morning mother and child were very ill, and something was said about applying to the police. 'I was in the room,' said Sister Agnes Bernard, 'and we thought she was asleep, but I shall never forget the look that was on her face, when, opening her eyes, she said imploringly: 'In God's name please don't, for they will tell him where I am, and I want to stay here and die in peace.' They tried to question her, but to no avail, and soon she relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in which she remained for two weeks, raving with brain fever, while her little girl, whom the doctor said was recovering from a light attack of scarlet fever, had caught cold from the exposure, which brought on a relapse. On the body of the young woman, who was not more than nineteen or twenty, were the marks of several severe bruises, while in her ravings she begged the Sister not to tell him where she was.

Enquiries were made in nearly every part of the city, but nothing could be learned until she had regained consciousness, when one of the Sisters drew the story from her. Left an orphan at a tender age, she had been with the Sisters until she was fifteen, when she went to work for a family who had one son about five years her senior. Young as she was, and unaccustomed to the world, she was never happier than in the company of the young man, who was very kind to her, and when chided by his mother for spending so much time with him, she became angry. In him she saw nothing but virtue, and knew not that he was fond of strong drink, which he would have taken very freely had it not been for the influence she had over him.

On her seventeenth birthday she became his wife, and for a time her life was a very happy one, until they removed to the city, where her husband obtained a good position; but with it came bad companions who led him to fall into his besetting vices and he was soon discharged. About this time the little girl was born, and the proud father tried for her sake to do better. Ill luck, however, seemed to attend him, for he could get no work, and then, driven from their little home, where they were unable to pay the rent, they found themselves in one dingy room of a rickety tenement.

(To be Continued.)

## An Irish Delegate.

At a meeting of the Irish Parliamentary Party, held at the House of Commons recently, John Redmond, the chairman, presiding, a resolution expressing satisfaction at the fact that Conor O'Kelly, M.P. for North Mayo, was going to America to help extend the United Irish League there, and bespeaking for him "a hearty welcome from our exiled fellow-countrymen" was adopted.