

Marriage

THE TWO COUSINS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"My future, my child, what are you thinking of?" asked Mr. Grey. "My life is almost over, so I have no future to think of?"

"Yes, dear father, I know," said Alexia, sadly, but are you prepared to meet your Creator?" She had not intended to speak so abruptly at once but rather to wait and see if he would not speak first; but in her efforts to elude the topic he had suggested, this came out involuntarily.

"No, Alexia," he said faintly. "I am not prepared as your mother was if that is what you mean, nor do I consider it necessary; for while I have great respect for the religious professed by my wife and daughter, I cannot believe in it. My dear child, I have always tried to live an honest upright life, so I have no fear of death."

At that moment the doctor entered, so no more was said on the subject, and when they were once more alone, Mr. Grey poured into the unwilling ears of his daughter the plans he had made for her. "If I could only see you married," he began, "I could die content." Then he proceeded to tell her how, only a few days before his departure from home, he had promised her to Andrew Hurley, who was then preparing to go to Europe, and he wished her to promise to marry the young man soon after his return.

"Oh, father," stammered Alexia, "please do not ask me to marry him for I never can. I know he is a good man, and I respect him as a friend, but I do not wish to marry."

"Why not, my child?" he asked. "I hope it is not on account of your foolish scruples about mixed marriages being unhappy, for think how happily your mother and I always lived together."

"Yes, father, I know you were happy, but your case was one of the exceptions," said Alexia. "As I said I have no desire to marry."

"Foolish girl," said her father, with a smile, "but you will soon forget that whim and I hope you will not refuse the good man who loves you—he hesitated as he looked at her face and said: "Why Alexia, what is the matter? You look as though you were going to faint. I am afraid you have not taken rest enough after your long journey, so you had better go and lie down."

"I am a little tired," she said, "but prefer remaining with you."

"No child," he said, "I would rather have you rest until evening then you may return, for the long nights are the hardest for me to be alone."

The young girl went to her room across the hall, but not to rest, for her mind was filled with sad thoughts, so she sat down by the window and gazed blankly out on the strange scene. It was her dear father she was thinking of now, and the grief of losing him; then her thoughts were of Andrew Hurley, and with many regrets she asked herself if she had given any encouragement to his little attentions.

True she had attended a few social gatherings with him, but Virginia and Robert had always been with them, and she had never dreamed that he cared for her other than as a friend.

Again her mind was with the loved one who stood unprepared at the very portals of death and at that moment her eye rested on an object which she had not seen before. Glistening in the sunshine not two blocks away, a gilded cross, the sign of redemption, tipped the spire of a beautiful church. The vision sent a thrill of joy to her heart, and hastily donning her hat and cloak, she made her way to the church and kneeling before the altar earnestly prayed for his conversion.

Three days later Mr. Grey called his daughter to his side and told her that he wished to see a priest. Alexia's happiness was unbounded as she hastened to comply with his request. The next morning, which was thought to be his last, he was received into the Church, and for several hours after his baptism he appeared to be so much stronger, that hopes of his recovery were entertained, but it was only the result of the lightness of heart he felt. After two weeks more of intense suffering, borne with Christian resignation, Mr. Grey fell into a peaceful slumber from which he never awoke.

Sad and lonely indeed would have been the long weary hours, during which Alexia scarcely left her father's bedside, had it not been for the kind-

ness of two Sisters of Mercy who came daily to alleviate her cares, and it was they whom she thanked for his conversion and happy death. Ere she left them she made a resolution to give her services to God in their order.

After laying her father to rest in the little Catholic cemetery beside her mother, the orphan went to live with her aunt. In a few days she received a long and affectionate letter from Andrew Hurley, who had sailed for Europe a week after her departure for the West. He expressed his regret at not having seen her before she went away, then followed a few touching lines of condolence for her loss, after which he delicately told her of the talk he had with her father, and of his own bright hopes of claiming her for his own on his return. Alexia read the letter when alone in her room, and shed many tears over the unhappy fate which had won for her the love of a noble-hearted man, whose affections she could not return. Not daring to read a second time that missive which was so full of the tender pleadings of human love, and fearing that it might fall into the hands of her cousin, she burned it, then wrote a short answer in which she thanked him for his kind offer, telling him that as a friend she would always respect him, but she could never marry.

CHAPTER IV.

June, the month of buds and bridal roses, had come; and in all the country there could not have been a happier bride than Virginia Summers, as, after the last touches had been put to her toilette, she stood before the long mirror and gazed admiringly upon a slender, girlish figure, arrayed in a gown of heavy white satin and a snowy veil, fastened to her golden hair with a festoon of orange blossoms. Beside her stood her cousin, arrayed in pale blue silk, the first color she had put on since her father's death.

"How pretty you look, Virginia," said Alexia, "and so happy too, it really seems that the elements of nature have combined to make your wedding day a delightful one, and my only hope is that your life may ever be as full of sunshine as it has been this day."

"Thank you, Alexia," said her cousin,—she paused for a moment, then continued in an undertone. "I believe my happiness to-day would be unmarred were it not for one little disappointment."

"And what is that," asked Alexia, "I thought that the arrangements for the wedding were complete."

"So they are," said the bride-elect, "but I had hoped that this would be a double wedding."

Alexia looked at her in amazement and asked: "What do you mean, Virginia?"

"Why, Alexia," said her cousin, "how innocent you are. We had hoped that Andrew and yourself would be married to-day and I believe you might have been had he not been recalled to Europe last winter. What a disappointment."

"It was no disappointment to me," said Alexia, "for while I am very happy to see others married well, I have no desire to follow their example."

"Oh, Alexia," said Virginia, "you have spent so much time mourning over the death of your parents that you have given yourself no time to think of what happiness there is in this bright world. If you only know what it is to love and be loved," and as she said this the bride's eyes grew brighter, "but you will soon know for Andrew's is home, to remain, now, and when he asks you to marry him please do not refuse him for he loves you devotedly and will make you very happy as his wife."

To almost any other young lady in the city the oft repeated announcement of the love of a man of Andrew Hurley's wealth and nobility of character would have been very pleasing, but the mere mention of his name pierced the heart of our young heroine like a poisoned dart. "Oh, Virginia, please do not talk so," she said, "I do not like to hear it."

Her cousin turned to her and noticing for the first time the expression of pain, which she could not hide, she said, "Alexia, dear, why do you act so strangely, you are so changed from what you used to be

I can hardly understand you at times."

The girl smiled and said, "You may understand me some time."

The happy light had faded from Virginia's face, but it returned with new vividness as she drew her cousin to the window and exclaimed, "See they have come, there is the carriage."

"Stand back, Virginia, or they will see you," said Alexia, drawing her back into the room, where, unobserved, they could see the two gentlemen who alighted. They were Robert and Andrew Hurley, and Alexia felt as though she would faint as she saw the latter stand for a moment and look up as though expecting to see some one at the window, then he followed his brother into the house. Never had Alexia longed so for solitude as she did now, when she was about to face the crowd in her aunt's parlor and attract almost as much attention as the bride herself, but with a silent prayer for strength she took her place in the bridal procession, and those who gazed upon her calm, sweet face as she stood by her cousin's side during the ceremony, never dreamed of the conflict going on within. Only once had she raised her eyes to meet the fervent glance of the groomsmen, who watched her intently, and she had dropped them as quickly, pretending to see him not.

Andrew Hurley had returned from Europe, when he was expected in the fall, and hoped to remain; but in two months he had been recalled to attend to important business in England which had kept him away until a week before his brother's marriage. Alexia's letter, stating that his offer had not been accepted, had at first filled him with a grave fear of losing the girl, who from the first time he had met her, had been very dear to him, but as he re-read her statement that she never intended to marry, hope returned, for he believed that it required only time and patience for him to win the prize which would be dearer for the winning.

It was her modest, retired ways which had first attracted him and he believed that she could not be easily won; but noble-hearted man that he was, he liked her for it. He had at first thought of answering her letter and begging for a word of hope, but after more mature consideration, he decided to wait until he saw her. By that time she would probably have recovered from the grief caused by her father's death, and might be willing to listen to him. From tidings from her he contented himself with what his brother wrote in nearly every letter. That she was keeping company with no one quieted every fear of there being any chance of losing her.

Several times during his two months at home he had sought an interview with Alexia; but with a queenly dignity she held herself aloof; meeting him only when necessary, and then always in the presence of some of her friends. He contented himself by watching her at a distance, as it were, for the present, hoping that when she had discarded her mourning, she would change. He had expected that his second European trip would detain him from home only a few weeks, but the weeks had lengthened into months, so that he could not return until a week before his brother's marriage, and now he was firmly resolved to leave nothing undone to win Alexia's heart and hand.

Mr. Hurley's visit at home had been a source of much anxiety to our young heroine, and the fear of meeting him often kept her at home when she might have spent a pleasant afternoon or evening among her friends. The caution, however, did not save her from the tongue of idle gossippers of the city; for having been seen on a few occasions, when he accompanied his brother to Mr. Summers', it had been reported that he went to see Alexia; then somebody said they were engaged, and there would probably be a double wedding in the spring; but Alexia's engagement had not been announced on account of the recent death of her father. Dame Gossip caught up the refrain, which reached the young girl's ears and caused her much suffering, which was renewed as she saw the admiring glances cast first at her, then at him, while the bride was receiving congratulations after her marriage. One lady turned to the bride to her, and in a tone that was audible throughout the room, said: "It is too bad, Miss Grey,

that this could not have been a double wedding, but I suppose it will not be long ere you, too, will wear the bridal veil and orange blossoms."

Alexia blushed deeply, but made no reply, for she was thinking of the pure, white bridal robes worn by the brides of Christ, whose number she hoped soon to join. Andrew Hurley saw that blush and mistaking its meaning, his heart throbbled with hope that encouraged him to approach her. As soon as supper was over he would ask her to take a stroll with him on the lawn; but he was disappointed, for as he turned to speak to Virginia, on arising from the table, she had disappeared.

"I have found you at last, Miss Grey," after looking for you for nearly an hour," said Mr. Hurley, as he came upon Alexia, alone in a secluded part of the lawn, whither she had flown to escape him.

"Been looking for me," said Alexia, rising from her rustic seat, and endeavoring to control her voice, which she knew trembled. "The heat and confusion in the house made my head ache, so I came out here to be quiet for a while and get a little fresh air." This was her excuse, and it was partly true, for her temples throbbled violently; but it had been his presence more than anything else which had caused the pain.

"It is much pleasanter here than in the heated parlors," he said, "and as that seat was undoubtedly made for two, can we not sit down and have a pleasant little chat?"

"Not now," she said, "I prefer returning to the house, as we will probably be missed, and besides I must help Virginia dress for her journey."

"I hardly think two would be missed any more than one has been," he said, "and it will be two hours or more before the carriage calls to take them to the depot, so you need not be in such a hurry to go."

"Come, let us go," said Alexia, deigning not to hear his last remark.

At that moment the orchestra struck up a lively waltz and Mr. Hurley said, "Yes, Miss Grey, on condition that you will favor me with this waltz."

"Thank you, Mr. Hurley," said Alexia, "but I never waltz."

"I forgot that your church disapproves of it," he said, apologetically, and although I see no harm in it, I admire your obedience to your religious principles; but you will not refuse me the next square set."

In her eagerness to get to the house, and thus prevent his speaking to her on the subject she dreaded most, Alexia consented, when they reached the front veranda the bride met them, and, with a face radiant with smiles, said, "Been out for a stroll in the twilight, I see, and I have been searching the whole house for you. How happy you look."

Others than Virginia had been watching them, and Alexia was greatly pained by the few remarks she overheard concerning her marriage, which they expected soon to attend. For this reason she at first declined to accompany the bridal party to the depot; but Virginia begged her to go and she could not refuse what might be the last favor she could ever grant the girl who had been as a dear sister to her.

Alexia was the last one to give the bride a farewell kiss, and as she embraced her cousin her tears flowed freely, bringing forth the whisper, "Why, Alexia, are you unhappy because I am married?"

"No, Virginia, I am very happy, because I know you are," said the young girl, and I hope your life will ever be as bright as it has been this day."

"Thank you, Alexia," said the bride, "and my best wishes are that you, too, will soon wear the bridal robes and orange blossoms."

"I hope I shall," whispered Alexia; "but good bye, your husband is waiting for you."

The cousin's lips were pressed together in another farewell kiss, and then like two beautiful streams which for many miles had flowed in parallel channels, then suddenly plunged off in opposite directions to flow through vastly different soils for many long miles, they separated.

CHAPTER V.

"Come, Miss Grey," said Andrew Hurley, taking Alexia's arm to lead

her to the carriage, "we must not stand here, for you know the old superstition says that if we watch our friends out of sight we shall never see them again."

"I am not at all superstitious," said Alexia, withdrawing her arm; but as the train is moving I suppose there is no need of waiting."

When they returned to the carriage and Alexia realized that she was alone with the man who had chosen her for a wife, and whom she knew loved her devotedly, she felt as though she would faint. When his arm stole gently and affectionately around her waist she had power neither to speak or move.

"Why are you so silent, Miss Grey?" he at length ventured to ask. "It seems so strange to know that my cousin is married, she said evasively, "I was thinking of her."

"And you doubtless envy her her happiness," he said.

"I am glad to see her so happy," said Alexia, "but I do not envy her."

"I suppose not," said Andrew, "that is well—you would not have wished to be my brother's bride, but—he hesitated again for her coldness chilled him so that he hardly realized what he was saying, then he added, "Alexia, I had hoped that this might have been a double wedding, that you and I would be the other bridal couple, but so far, fate has seemed to be against me."

He spoke sadly, and Alexia's heart went out to him in a bond of sympathy as to one for whom there is no shadow of hope. She strove to tell him so, but her voice had forsaken her and she only opened her lips to close them again over her firmly set teeth. Unfortunately it was dark, so that he could not see her death-like face, otherwise he would not have dared to continue.

In the deepest tones of pleading tenderness and love, he told her how long he had waited in hopes of winning from her some love in return for the deep feeling which he had borne for her from the first time of their meeting. He reminded her of her father's approval of their marriage, telling her how her refusal had grieved him, but how she had still retained a tender spot in his heart and how his brightest hours, during his long months abroad, had been spent in dreaming of the beautiful home of which she was to be mistress.

"Mr. Hurley," she said at last in a faint trembling voice which sounded so unlike her own, "please do not talk so, I can not bear it when I can never be your wife."

"Do you mean it, Alexia?" he asked sadly. "Is there no hope for me?"

"None," she answered in a low, firm tone, "so let us dismiss the subject."

"And why?" he asked, "is it on account of our difference in religion?"

"That would be a sufficient reason," she said, "for marriage between people whose religion differs so vastly is almost sure to bring unhappiness, but I have a much stronger motive."

"I see no reason why a husband and wife who are devotedly attached to each other should experience any unhappiness even if their religious opinions do not coincide," he said, "and I know of some mixed marriages which have been far happier than many where both parties believed the same."

"There are exceptions to most rules," said Alexia, "but it is not always well to run the risk with hopes of being an exception."

"But your motive for refusing me," he said, "my I ask it?"

"I have told you," she said, "that I never intend to marry, and is not that sufficient?"

"You are a strange girl," he said, "and I cannot understand how a young lady of your position and talents can choose to become an old maid rather than fill her proper place as the wife of a man to whom she is dearer than life itself."

"God did not intend that all should marry," she said, "and as for myself, I am fully convinced that I have chosen right."

"Alexia," he said—he would still forbear the formality of addressing her as Miss Grey.—"I hope you will ponder well on this ere you give your final answer."

"I have," she said, "my first answer was final."

helped her to alight he said again: "Ponder well on the decision you have made, and I shall hope for a more favorable answer at our next meeting."

He looked at her face, which had never seemed so beautiful as it did now in the light of the full summer's moon. There was such a sweet sadness in those bright eyes which would not meet his, but seemed looking far away into some unknown space. It reminded him of the expression he had noticed when early in the evening she had stood under the brilliant light in the parlor and sung "Kathleen Mavourneen" in a voice filled with plaintive sweetness which had thrilled his heart, but at the same time had seemed to whisper to him that the singer lived in a world far above him, and he could not reach her.

The disappointed lover tried to hold her hand, but she drew it away as soon as her feet touched the ground. Pretending not to hear his last words, she said "Good night, Mr. Hurley," and as if forgetting that any one was near, she hurried up the walk singing.

"It may be for years, it may be forever."

These words sank deep into Andrew Hurley's heart and repeated themselves to him again and again not only on his way home but in after years, whenever he heard that beautiful ballad, there came with it a vision of the young girl whom he saw for the last time that evening.

On re-entering the carriage his hand rested on something in the seat which he at first thought was a necklace. On closer examination he found that it was a little pearl rosary, which Alexia had evidently dropped. His first impulse was to call her back and give it to her, but, thinking it would serve as an excuse to call on her soon, he put it in his pocket.

"Where is Alexia, mother?" asked Virginia Hurley after greeting the rest of the family on her return from her two weeks' wedding tour. I expected she would be the first one to welcome me."

"Alexia is gone," said Mrs. Summers sadly.

"Gone, mother!" said Virginia, "where has she gone?"

"To the convent," was the reply.

"What, mother, gone to visit the Sisters again," said Virginia, "and it is only a little over a month since she spent three whole days at the convent in A—". When did she go?"

"Two days after you left," was the reply.

"And has not yet returned," interrupted Virginia before her mother could proceed with an explanation. "I almost fear at times that the Sisters will be trying to coax my cousin from us entirely. How I wish that she would not visit them so often."

"And that they have done already," said Mrs. Summers sadly, for our Alexia has not gone to A— this time, but to the Mercy Convent in Hilton, where she intends to join the order."

"Mother!" said Virginia, "oh, mother, I can hardly believe it."

"It is so," said Mrs. Summers. "Oh, mother," exclaimed the girl, sinking into a chair, "how could you permit it. Why didn't you keep her at home?"

"We did all we could to prevent it," said her mother "but it was all to no avail, for she turned a deaf ear to all our entreaties. You know, Virginia, that as mild as your cousin appears she has a strong will, and being of age we could not keep her."

"This is dreadful, mother," moaned Virginia, "and poor Andrew, how does he bear it?"

"I do not know," said her mother, "as I have not seen him since the evening of your marriage; but it was doubtless sad news to him."

(Continued.)