

LESSONS.

THE TWO COUSINS.

By MARY ROWENA COTTER.

CHAPTER I.

Few truer, warmer friendships ever existed between two girls than that which bound together the hearts of Alexia Grey and Virginia Summers, and in more ways than one, few dislocations differed more widely than theirs. They were cousins, nearly the same age, both were only daughters, and, being born and brought up to the age of twelve in the same neighborhood, they seemed like sisters. Their childish love was so strong that the thought of separating them seemed almost a cruelty, but the heart of Alexia's father had long been in the far West, where he had often dreamed that a princely fortune awaited him, and thither he went, taking his wife and child.

Five years passed, and then, with this bright dream partially realized, Mr. Grey returned to his native city, and his accumulated wealth failed to bring him happiness for his dear wife had been in delicate health for many months, and it was with hopes of her recovery that he had brought her back. Nothing that kind friends and money could do for the invalid was left undone, but all to no avail, for one evening about two months after their return she breathed her last in the arms of her daughter. Virginia was the only other person present, and as Alexia turned to her for sympathy, in this the saddest hour of her life, another bond of friendship seemed to spring up between them, and from that day much of their time was spent together.

But here let us take a glance at the girls as they appeared at the age of seventeen. Alexia, who was a few weeks the senior, was of medium height, her hair was of a beautiful shade between a brown and a gold, and her eyes, which were of a deep blue, had in them a sweet expression which imparted beauty to her otherwise not handsome face, and attracted much admiration. Virginia on the other hand was tall and stately and had a queenly bearing which contrasted greatly with her cousin's air of retirement. She was a blonde, having great masses of waving golden hair, a fair complexion and eyes which differed from Alexia's only in the fact that they shone with birth and happiness. Every one agreed in saying that Virginia was very beautiful. She was one of those light-hearted girls who, never having known an hour of sorrow, looked upon life as one day of continuous sunshine out of which we ought to take as much pleasure as possible, and her greatest aim was to appear well and to make friends. In this she succeeded well, for wherever she went she was always sure to find a hearty welcome. Alexia, however, was scarcely known outside of a small circle of friends, and preferring the company of books in her own home she cared to make few new friends, and many who did not know her thought that her cousin was the only girl for whom she had any affection, and they wondered how they could love each other so devotedly when they were so different.

Mrs. Grey's death had cast a gloom over her daughter's life which Virginia's smiling face and cheerful ways alone could dispel; and, while Virginia might have been better pleased to have seen her cousin manifest more of her own bright spirits, still she loved her most devotedly, finding only one fault, but it was with a feeling of sympathy rather than censure that she looked upon the deplorable fact that her dear Alexia was a Catholic.

From childhood Virginia had learned from her parents to deeply regret her uncle's marriage to a Catholic, an offence which no Grey had ever before thought of committing. Still more angry had they been when he had permitted his child to be baptized by a Catholic priest, but they had fostered hopes that if Alexia were brought up a Catholic the time might come when she could be turned from her error. Their first impulse had been to disown him for his folly, but later they had wisely concluded that such an act would make matters worse on both sides; so they acknowledged Mrs. Grey as one of the family and while their bigotry was unaltered, they soon learned to love her on account of her winning ways. Happily for her she never knew of the feeling which still lurked in the hearts of her husband's relatives. With Alexia it was different, for her keen, sensitive nature was quick to perceive how they despised her faith; but while it caused her

many a bitter pang, she appeared only to see the affection they sought to bestow upon her. The long, sad year of mourning for her mother's death had drawn to a close, and more to please her aunt and cousin than through any vain feelings of her own, Alexia had laid aside her black and began preparations to enter society with Virginia. In childhood the girls had anticipated with an equal interest this important event of their lives, but now to Alexia it seemed almost a sacrifice to think of attending parties and operas with her mother dead. However, as her love for her cousin daily increased, she found it more difficult to long remain uninterested in anything that pleased her; her father, too, being very proud of her, had only one ambition, which was to see his Alexia admired and married well. It was not long ere the first was realized, and for three years the two fair young ladies reigned as queens of society, one winning hosts of admirers by her efforts to make herself attractive, while the other captivated hearts by her gentle, unassuming ways. Neither had any thought of choosing a companion for life, for Virginia preferred remaining free to enjoy the pleasures of single blessedness for some years to come, while Alexia cared for no man but her father, whom she felt deserved her undivided affections; so while he lived she would not marry.

"With echoing steps the worshippers departed one by one; The organ's pealing voice was still ed.

The vesper hymn was done; The shadows fell from roof and arch.

Dim was the incensed air, One lamp alone with trembling ray; Told of the Presence there."

—Proctor.

It was the last evening of the lovely month of May, and Alexia had gone alone to the Cathedral to be present at the closing of the May devotions. That afternoon had been the first that she had spent alone with her cousin for some time, and they had expected to attend the devotions together, but they were disappointed.

They had passed their twentieth birthdays, and Virginia, who was an artist, had a studio where she spent most of her time. She had several pupils who had free access to her rooms, so she was seldom alone with her cousin, who often visited her. Alexia felt it her duty to spend her evenings with her father, when he was at home, but as he had business which often kept him away for several days at a time, she could be with Virginia during his absence. These evenings, which had once been so pleasant for Alexia, were rather tiresome now, for her cousin's attentions were too often claimed by Robert Hurley, a wealthy young gentleman whose acquaintance she had recently made. True, she was always welcome to remain in the parlor with them, and Mr. Hurley always inquired for her when she was absent, but—will I call it selfishness to say that she preferred having her cousin all to herself?—so with him there, she was always glad when she could excuse herself and go to her own room. At first she had tried to sit up in her room and wait for her cousin, but as she had been accustomed to retire very early, she found herself falling asleep in her chair before his departure. With a sad heart she felt that her Virginia was slowly drifting away from her, and at the same time she began to have a distaste for the gay society into which she had drawn her, and to wish to be alone where all was quiet.

One thing alone Alexia had been unwilling to sacrifice to please her adored companion, and that was her religion, to which she had remained as steadfast as when she had gone to church with her mother. Although it grieved her to be obliged to refuse to gratify her slightest wishes, she had in obedience to the rules of her own faith declined Virginia's pressing invitations to attend prayer meeting with her, or perhaps go to hear some of the noted evangelists who visited the city. With Virginia her religion was little more than a matter of fashion, for she attended one of the most aristocratic Protestant churches in the city, scarcely knowing what the teachings of that church was grounded, and nei-

ther did she care very much, for her motto was that "one church was as good as another, and as long as anyone tried to do right, they were as well off not to attend to any church." Happily for her she was possessed of many natural virtues, which kept her in the path of justice and which had they grown out of a true faith like her cousin, might have shown as resplendent stars for eternity.

Alexia's refusal to attend her church had met with a like refusal on her part, but on this afternoon when she heard of the grand closing exercises of the May devotions, she had sent a thrill of joy through the heart of her cousin by saying that she wished to attend. They had stopped at the Cathedral on their way home from a long walk to see the decorations which were placed at Mary's shrine, and Virginia, who was passionately fond of flowers, had talked of it all the rest of the way home, commenting on how beautiful the shrine must look in the evening, when the candles were lighted. In the evening the girls were putting on their hats when the door bell rang, then a rap came at their door and a servant announced Mr. Hurley.

"I am so sorry I cannot go with you," said Virginia when she saw the look of disappointment on her cousin's face, "but you will excuse me this time, won't you, dear?"

"Certainly," said Alexia, forcing a smile, and as Virginia laid her hat on the table, and after a hurried down stairs, she added: "Good night Virginia, I hope you will have a glance in her mirror started to go pleasant evening and I will try to see you at the studio to-morrow."

"Aren't you coming back to-night?" asked Virginia.

"No," said her cousin, "I think I will go home, as I have some work to finish in the morning."

"Good night, then, dear cousin." Throwing her arms around her cousin's neck she kissed her affectionately, and with a face beaming with smiles she hurried down stairs.

Alexia looked sadly after her, feeling more keenly than ever the great change that was coming over her, for something told her that the happy days they had spent together were drawing to a close, and she almost wished that Mr. Hurley had never met her cousin. Such a feeling might seem like selfishness on her part, but left as she had been with no other woman on whom to bestow her affection and confidence, she could hardly be blamed for this pang; but Virginia never dreamed how her cousin felt. Had she known it she would only have laughed at her, for she had often told her that she liked Mr. Hurley as a friend and an escort to social gatherings, but she had no thought of marriage.

There were tears in Alexia's eyes as she silently guided down the back stairs and out through the back door to escape Mr. Hurley, who always inquired for her; but when she was out in the air she wiped them away and gazed heedlessly on toward the Cathedral. The tears flowed afresh when she heard the sweet voices of the Children of Mary answer the Litany of Loretto, sung by the priest, and saw the beautiful procession as it wended its way through the long aisles of the grand old Church, and pause before Our Lady's shrine, which was ablaze with lights. Under any other circumstances Alexia would have felt while looking on the lovely vision, that she had almost a foretaste of heaven, but to-night there was sadness mingled with her joy, for she knew that Virginia, whose artistic tastes made her such a passionate lover of beauty, would have enjoyed it so much; but during this hour Virginia was so deeply interested in a game of chess, and Mr. Hurley's bright conversation that she entirely forgot her cousin.

It was over now, and continuing in the beautiful words of Adelaide Proctor we might say: "In the dark Church she knelt alone."

Her tears were falling fast, for, for aught she knew or cared what was passing around her, Alexia was indeed alone. With the exception of a number of penitents who knelt around the confessionals, waiting to purify their hearts for the reception of Holy Communion on the morrow, which was to be the first Friday as well as the first day of the Sacred Heart's own month, all had left the Church. She had received her month's Communion last Sunday and had had no intention of going again to-morrow; but still she lingered as if

loathe to leave the church. As soon as the crowd, which for a few minutes thronged the railing in front of Mary's shrine, had dispersed, she went and knelt there for half an hour as if she fain would pour out all the loneliness she felt into the heart of her heavenly mother, but her tears continued to flow and she found it hard to say even a Hail Mary with any devotion.

At length suddenly recollecting herself, and remembering the peace of mind that the Sacraments bring, she took her place among the penitents near one of the confessionals and made her preparations while she waited her turn. Soon her tears were dried, and when she came out of the confessional her mind was much calmer, but there still lingered a feeling of sadness in her heart. She returned to the Blessed Virgin's altar but the last light and bouquet had been taken away and placed on the altar of the Sacred Heart, for as that dear Virgin Mother had lived in the world before the coming of her Divine Son, as if to prepare our hearts for Him; so on the morrow she would gladly yield up the veneration she had received during the past thirty-one days to the worship of His Sacred Heart.

It was now nearly ten o'clock, but unwilling to leave the church, and still sad at heart, she turned her steps toward the shrine of the Sacred Heart and kneeling before it tried to pray but could not. For a long time she gazed intensely, first at the sweet, sad face, then at the bleeding heart, which had been vividly represented by the sculptor until she felt that she almost heard that gentle whisper, "My child, give me thy heart." Again and again those favorite lines which she had so often read and greatly admired repeated themselves. Hardly realizing what they meant, and little dreaming of the life in store for her, she said: "Lord help me to obey." Her heart was touched now and she could pray. So absorbed was she that she heeded not the passing moments until the sexton laid his hand gently on her arm and told her that she was the only person who remained in the church and he wished to close for the night.

With one more lingering glance at the Divine Heart she left the place, her own heart filled with a peace such as she had not known for a long time.

"The blessing fell upon her soul The angel by her side Knew that the hour of peace had come;

Her soul was purified; The shadow fell from roof and arch, Dim was the incensed air, But Peace went with her as she left The Sacred Presence there."

—Adelaide Proctor.

CHAPTER III.

Little less than a year and a half has passed and the engagement of Robert Hurley and Virginia Summer has recently been announced. Alexia was alone in her room when her cousin entered, her face beaming with smiles and blushes as she handed her the morning paper which conveyed the news to the social world. The happy smile on Alexia's face told that the old feeling of jealousy (she now called it) toward the one who had claimed her cousin's affections was gone and she was both proud and happy to hear the approaching marriage spoken of. Apparently she enjoyed nothing more than the confidential little talks they often had of the bright June days when she would have the privilege of carrying Virginia's bridal roses and arranging the wreath of orange blossoms for her fair hair. The secret was that the month of June promised a happy event in her own life which she dared not even hint to her cousin, from whom she had never kept the smallest secret, for she knew too well that to reveal the plan would only call forth the strongest opposition on the part of her relatives.

Suddenly the light faded from Alexia's face, her hand trembled, and she would have dropped the paper had she not maintained a wonderful control over herself. Half way down the column her eyes had fallen upon the announcement that Andrew Hurley, Robert's only brother, was expected home that week. She glanced at her cousin to see if her agitation had been noticed, but hap-

ply, Virginia was too busily engaged in arranging a bouquet of geraniums to see her.

"Aren't those pretty, Alexia?" she said, bringing the vase over to her cousin. "They are part of the flowers Robert sent me from which to select my bouquet for this evening."

"Very pretty," said Alexia, taking the vase, "and how kind of you to give them to me. Thank you very much."

As she replaced the vase on the table Virginia selected a pretty double pink flower and said, "Won't you please let me put this in your hair. You look so gloomy in that plain black dress that you ought to wear a little color."

"Why, Virginia," said Alexia, "everybody says that black is becoming to me, and I do not dislike it myself, even though it be a semblance of mourning." Her voice trembled slightly as she said this, but her light-hearted cousin noticed it not, for she was too busily engaged in arranging the flowers in her cousin's hair. When she spoke it was to express her admiration of those heavy, shining braids, the possession of which she had always so greatly envied their owner.

"You admire my hair so much I wish you had it, for it is really a burden to me," said Alexia, "and it is so heavy that it often makes my head ache. More than once I have been tempted to cut it off."

"You wicked girl," said Virginia, "you must never think of such a thing again," and resting her hand caressingly upon her cousin's head she added, "I almost forgot to tell you that Robert's brother, Andrew, is expected home from Europe this week."

"So I saw by the paper," was Alexia's careless reply, "I suppose his family will be very happy."

"Yes," said Virginia, "for it has been nearly a year since he went abroad, and they have been so lonely without him. But he expects to remain at home now until after our wedding and perhaps longer, and I am so glad."

Her face was beaming with smiles as she said this, and her cousin wondered why she was so pleased, little dreaming what was in her mind, until she added: "How coolly you seem to take the good news. Really, Alexia, I believe you knew all the time that he was expected this month, but would not tell me; I have believed for some time that you were keeping some secret from me, but I have it now."

Alexia's face crimsoned, then turned deadly pale, as a suspicion that her cousin knew the truth dawned upon her. With an effort to control herself she said: "Believe me, dear cousin, I knew nothing of Mr. Hurley's being expected until I saw it in the paper."

"Perhaps not," said Virginia, who knew by her cousin's face that she was telling the truth, "but it is no secret to me that Andrew Hurley loves you, and it is mostly on your account that he is coming home."

Alexia's face again turned crimson, and she only managed to stammer out: "I was not aware of being the attraction to bring him home."

"It is really so," said her cousin, "for Robert told me that he wrote it in his last letter, and nearly every time he has heard from him he has made some inquiry for you. Strange that he hasn't written to you himself."

Alexia pressed her hands to her forehead as if to still the throbbing temples, but Virginia did not see her for her own hand lay in the sunlight and as she talked lightly on, her eyes were fixed admiringly on the gorgeous rays that shot from her diamond engagement ring. "Robert and I have often talked of it, and it has made us both so happy to know that his brother intends to marry you. We shall always live near each other and will be so happy. I have often wished to talk it over with you, but thought it best to wait until Andrew came home and would let you be the first to speak of it, but I can keep quiet no longer."

Alexia longed to flee from the room or beg of her to stop, but found strength neither to speak or move, until after going on in this light, happy tone for some time, Virginia said, "How I wish that we could persuade you to lay aside your mourning and go into society again this winter. I know that Andrew will expect it and your father too," where she lowered her voice to a low

reverential tone, "I know he would approve could he speak to you."

The mention of her father's name brought tears to the eyes of the orphan girl and gave her voice to speak. "Oh, Virginia, how can you speak of my attending balls and father not yet dead ten months?" No, it is too soon; I often regretted that I entered society so soon after dear mother's death."

"Foolish girl," said Virginia, "to waste so much of your young life in mourning, for it can neither help the dear dead or bring them back."

"I know it cannot bring them back," said Alexia, "and if they are happy who could wish them to return to this dark world, but it shows them respect, and, dear cousin, you know not what it is to lose both parents."

Virginia was kneeling at her cousin's side now, and with both arms around her neck, was kissing her and begging her pardon for having offended or grieved her. Thus ended the conversation about Andrew Hurley and Alexia for the time felt relieved; but Virginia soon left her alone to meditate on the thoughts which, while they might have been very sweet to most young girls, brought inexpressible grief to the heart of her who could never return the affections bestowed upon her.

Andrew Hurley, the man of her father's was coming from Europe to marry her. The thought almost maddened her and her pain was still more intense when she thought what a noble, true-hearted man he was and how he might feel his disappointment. Once she thought of feeling before he came and hiding herself where he would never again behold her; but after more mature consideration she thought best to remain at home and trust to the protection of Divine Providence until the time appointed for her to go.

Alexia was alone in the world now, her father, as has already been stated, having died less than ten months before. It was not quite a year ago that he had been called to the far West on business which would keep him away for several weeks; but his last promise was to be home to spend Christmas. Each day for three weeks Alexia heard from him, then a week followed without a single letter, at the end of which a message came saying that he was very ill and wished to see her. Alone, the girl started on her long journey, with a heart filled with sorrowful misgivings lest her father might be dead ere she reached him; and still more sad was the thought that he might be called unprepared to meet his Creator; for though brought up a strict Episcopalian, he had long since given up his religion, and the brilliant example of his wife and child had failed to bring him to the true Fold.

After a journey of three long days and nights, which had been spent in prayer for her father's conversion, Alexia reached his bedside to find him even worse than she anticipated, for his death had been almost hourly expected since the message had been sent to her. Nevertheless he retained full possession of his senses, and they said that he had seemed to live on the hope of seeing his child. The greeting between them was a most affectionate one, and as soon as Alexia, in accordance with the sick man's wishes, had taken a little rest, he called her to his bedside and told her that he expected to leave her soon and wished to talk of her future.

This was a subject she dreaded to speak of, for she had made plans for herself which he did not understand or approve. Since the evening she had knelt at the shrine of the Sacred Heart and found there such a sweet peace of mind, her own heart had drifted farther from all earthly affections; and she had resolved to give herself entirely to God.

Turning to the invalid she sweetly asked, "And what of your own future, dear father?"

(To be continued.)

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