SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

Doctor Strickland, his two daughters, Alix and Cherry, and his niece, Anne, live together in the California redwoods, and Peter Joyce, their neighbor, comes and goes at will. Martin Lloyd, a visiting engineer, proposes to Cherry. Peter has a stab of pain as he realizes that this is actually true. Anne and Justin Little marry. Cherry continues her visit after the wedding. Peter tells Alix that he has loved another woman and proposes marriage to her. The doctor hints to Cherry that she had better return to her husband. Peter drives her to the station with Alix. "Get in here, Cherry," Peter said, opening the door of the seat beside his own. "Doctor, we'll be back in about an hour."

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"WITHOUT Cherry!" her father said with a rueful smile.

"Without Cherry!" Peter echoed, looking at her gravely.

It was then that Cherry saw in Peter's expression something that she did not forget for many, many months—never quite forgot. He wore a rough tramping costume today, a Sunday, and he was halfway up the porch steps, ready to carry bags to the waiting motorcar. His eyes were fixed upon her with something so yearning, so loving, so troubled in their gaze that a thrill went through Cherry from head to foot. He instantly averted his look, turned to the car, fumbled with the gears; they were off. He was to drive them all the way to Sausalito; Alix commented joyously upon the beauty of the day.

Cherry, tied trimly into a hat that was all big daisies, was silent for a while. But when Alix and Anne commenced an interested conversation in the back seat, she suddenly said regretfully:

"Oh, I hate to go away this time! I mind it more even than the first time!"

Peter, edging smoothly about a wide blue puddle, nodded sympathetically, but did not answer.

"I envy Alix——" Cherry said in idle mischief. She knew that the subject was not a safe one, but was irresistibly impelled to pursue it.

"Alix?" said Peter, after a silence long enough to make her feel ashamed of herself.

"Yes. Her young man lives in Mill Valley, right near home!" elucidated Cherry.

"Am I Alix's young man?" he asked, amused.

"Well, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I've never been any one's young man," said Peter.

"Whoever the woman who treated you meanly is—I hate her!" Cherry began again. "Unless," she added, "unless she was very young, and you never told her!"

This time he did not answer at all, and they spun along in utter silence. But when they were nearing Sausalito, Cherry said almost timidly:

"I think perhaps it would make her happy—and proud, to know that you admired her, Peter. I don't know who she is, of course, but almost any woman would feel that. This visit, somehow, has made me feel as if you and I had really begun a new friendship on our own account, not just the old friendship. And I shall often think of that talk we had a week ago, and—think of you, too.

"N-n-next time you fall in love I hope you will be luckier!"

Silence. But he gave her his quick, friendly smile. Cherry dared not speak again.

"Last stop—all out!" Alix exclaimed. "You get tickets, Peter. Hurray, there's Martin!"

Unexpectedly Martin's big figure came toward them from the ferry gate. Some ore from the mine had to be assayed in San Francisco, and he had volunteered to make the trip so that he might meet his wife and bring her back with him to Red Creek. Time hanging on his hands in the city, he had crossed the bay for the pleasure of the return trip with Cherry. He met them beamingly. There was a little confusion of greeting and good-bys. Alix and Peter watched the others at the railing until the ferryboat turned. Martin smiled over Anne's head; Cherry, both little white-gloved hands on the rail, blue eyes and a glint of bright hair showing under the daisies on her hat, her small figure enveloped in a big loose coat, looked as if she would like to cry again.

"It must be fun to be married, and go off to strange places with your beau!" Alix decided. "I'm hungry, Peter; let's go over there and treat ourselves to fried oysters!"

"Let's go home," he said, unsympathetically. "I'm not hungry."

"Oh, very well!" Alix agreed, airily, jumping into the seat beside him. "Though what has given you a grouch I really am at a loss to imagine!" she added under her breath.

"I don't hear you!" shouted Peter, who was suddenly rushing the engine.

"You weren't intended to!" she shouted back. And until they were halfway home, and Alix laughed out in sudden shame and good-nature not another word was spoken. The bright weather had changed suddenly, and a wet spring cloud was spreading over the sky.

"Love me, Peter?" Alix asked, suddenly.

"Not always!" he answered, briefly and sincerely. Fog was creeping over the marshes, the air was full of damp chill. A memory of the coat-enveloped figure and the blue eyes that smiled wistfully under a daisied hat was wringing his heart.

"Listen," began Alix again. "Let's stop for dad, it's going to pour. And let's go up to your house to eat?"

Silence.

"We can play duets all evening!" Alix added, temptingly.

"Little and Anne coming back?" Peter asked, unwillingly.

"No; they're dining with the Quelquechoses—those bright-faced, freckled cousins of his," Alix answered.

"I don't know that I've got anything up there to eat!" Peter said, gloomily.

"Ooo—say!" Alix said, brightening suddenly with her incorrigible childishness of expression. "Kow's got eggs and cream, isn't he? I'll make that new thing I was telling you about—it's delicious. Oh, and an onion—" she broke off in concern.

"He has an onion," Peter admitted. "What dish?" he asked, interested in spite of himself, as Alix fell into a rapturous reverie.

"Well, you fry a chopped onion," Alix began, "and then you have a lot of hard-boiled eggs—" In another moment they were deep in culinary details.

Martin's work was in the Contra Costa valley, and he and Cherry had a small house in Red Creek, the only town of any size near the mine. Red Creek was in a fruit-farming and dairy region and looked its prettiest on the spring evening when Cherry saw it first. The locusts were in leaf and ready to bloom, and the first fruit blossoms were scattered in snowy whiteness up and down the valley.

Her little house was a cottage with a porch running across the front where windows looked out from the sitting room and the front bedroom. Back of these rooms were a dark little bathroom that connected the front bedroom with another smaller bedroom, a little dining room and a kitchen. Almost all the houses in Red Creek were duplicates, except in minor particulars, of this house, but this particular specimen was older than some of the others and showed signs of hard usage. The kitchen floor was chipped and stained, and the bathroom basin was plugged with putty; there were odd bottles partly full of shoe polish and ink and vinegar, here and there; and on the shelves of the triangular closet in the dining room were cut and folded pieces of spotted white paper.

Martin, man-fashion, had merely camped in kitchen and bedroom while awaiting his wife; but Cherry buttoned on her crisp little apron on the first morning after her arrival, and attacked the accumulated dishes in the sink, and the scattered shirts and collars bravely. It was a cold, raw morning, and she went to and fro briskly, burning rubbish in the airtight stove in the sitting room, and keeping a good wood fire going in the kitchen, and feeling housewifely and efficient as she did so.

After a lunch, for which she was praised and applauded in something of the old honeymoon way, she walked to market, passing blocks of other little houses like her own, with bare dooryards where nipped chrysanthemums dangled on poles, and where play wagons, puddles of water, and picking chickens alternated regularly. Other marketing women looked at Cherry with the quickly averted look that is only given to beauty; but the men in the shops wrote down the new name and address with especial seal and amiability. She remembered the old necessities, bacon and lard and sugar and matches; she recovered the kitchen clock from its wrapping of newspaper, and wound it, and set it on the sink shelf; she was busy with a hundred improvements and cares, and was almost too tired, when Martin came home to dinner, to sit up and share it with him.

It was warm in the dining room and Cherry yawned over her dessert, and rose stiff and aching to return to the kitchen with plates and silver, glasses and food, to shake the tablecloth, to pile and wash and wipe and put away the china, to brush the floor and the stove, and do the last wiping and wringing, and to turn out the gas, and go in to her chair beside the airtight stove.

Martin handed her half his paper and Cherry took it, realizing with cheerful indifference that there was a streak of soot on one cuff, and that her hands were affected by grease and hot water.

She read jokes and recipes and answers to correspondents, and small editorial fillers as to the number of nutmegs consumed in China yearly, and the name and circumstances of the oldest living man in England. A new novel was in her bedroom, but she was too comfortable and too tired to go get it, and at 10 she rose, yawning and stumbling, and went to bed. Breakfast must be on the table at half-past 7, for Martin left for the mine at 8, and she had had a hard day.

For a few weeks the novelty lasted and Cherry was enthusiastic about everything. She looked out across her dishpan at green fields and the beginning of the farms; she saw the lilacs burst into fragrant plumes on the bare branches of her dooryard trees; spring flushed the whole world with loveliness, and she was young, and healthy, and too busy to be homesick.

Martin left the house at 8 and was usually at home at 5. He would sometimes come into her kitchen while she finished dinner, and tell her about the day, and then suggested that they go to the "pictures" at night. But although Cherry and Alix often had coaxed their father into this dissipation in Mill valley, it was different there, she found. That was a small colony of city people, the theatre was small, and the films carefully selected. One sat with one's neighbors and friends. But here in Red Creek the theatre was a draughty barn, and the farm workers, big men, odorous of warm, acid perspiration, pushed in laughing and noisy; the films were of a different character, too, and advertised by frightful colored posters at the doors. Martin himself did not like them; indeed, he and Cherry found little to like in either the people or the town.

It was a typical railroad town of California. It was flat, dusty, all its buildings of wood. There were some 2000 souls in Red Creek; two or three stores, a bakery from which the crude odor of baking bread burst every night; saloons, warehouses, a smithy, a butcher shop open only two days a week, a Chinese laundry from which opium-tainted steam issued all day and all night; cattle sheds, pepper trees, wheat barns, and a hotel of raw pine, with a narrow bedroom represented by every one of the forty narrow windows in its upper stories, and a lower floor decorated with spittoons. Back of the crowded main street was another street, beside which Main street's muddy ugliness was beautiful. Here was another saloon, and rooms above it, and several disreputable cottages about which Cherry sometimes saw odd-looking women.

Not every one in Red Creek was poor, by any means. It was a district bursting with prosperity; all summer long wheat and fruit and butter and beef poured through it out into the world. Down the road a mile or two, and back toward the far hills, were comfortable ranches where trees planted fifty years before had grown to mammoth proportions, and where the women of the family cultivated gardens. Every family had pigs and cattle and fine horses, and mud-spattered motorcars were familiar sights in Red Creek's streets.

Cherry used to wonder why anybody who could live elsewhere lived here. When some of the ranch girls told her that they always did their shopping in San Francisco, she marveled that they could reconcile themselves to come home.

The days went on and on, each bringing its round of dishes, beds, sweeping, marketing, folding and unfolding tablecloths, going back and forth between kitchen and dining room.

Martin's breakfast was either promptly served and well cooked, in which case Martin was silently satisfied, or it was late and a failure, when he was very articulately disgusted; in either case Cherry was left to clear and wash and plan for another meal in four hours more. She soaked fruit, beat up cake, chopped boxes into kindlings, heated a kettle of water and another kettle of water, dragged sheets from the bed only to replace them, filled dishes with food only to find them empty and ready to wash again.

"I get sick of it!" she told Martin.

"Well, Lord!" he exclaimed. "Don't you think everybody does? Don't I get sick of my work? You ought to have the responsibility of it all for a while!"

His tone was numerously reproving rather than unkind. But such a speech would fill Cherry's eyes with tears, and cause her to go about the house all morning with a heavy heart.

She would find herself looking thoughtfully at Martin in these days, studying him as if he were an utter stranger. It bewildered her to feel that he actually was no more than that, after two years of marriage. She not only did not know him, but she had a baffled sense that the very nearness of their union prevented her from seeing him fairly. She knew that she did him injustice in her thoughts.

It must be injustice, decided Cherry. For Martin seemed to her less clever, less just, less intelligent, and less generous than the average man of her acquaintance. And yet he did not seem to impress other people in the way he impressed her.

He was extraordinarily healthy, and had small sympathy for illness, weakness, for the unfortunate, and the complaining. He was scrupulously clean, and Cherry added that to his credit, although the necessity of seeing that Martin's bath, Martin's shaving water, and Martin's clean linen were ready complicated her duties somewhat. He was not interested in the affairs of the day; politics, reforms, world movements generally found him indifferent, but he would occasionally favor his wife with a sudden opinion as to China or intensive farming or Lloyd's shipping. She knew when he did this that he was quoting. He whistled over his dressing, read the paper at breakfast, and was gone. At noon he rushed in, always late, devoured his lunch appreciatively, and was gone again. At night he was usually tired, inclined to quarrel about small matters, inclined to disapprove of the new positions of the bedroom furniture, or the way Cherry's hair was dressed.

He loved to play poker and was hospitable to a certain extent. He would whistle and joke over the preparations for a rarebit after a game, and would willingly walk five block for beer if Cherry had forgotten to get it. On Sunday he liked to see her prettily gowned; and now and then they motored with his friends from the mine; more often walked, ate a hearty chicken dinner, and went to a cold supper in the neighborhood, with "Five Hundred" to follow. At ten their hostess would flutter into her kitchen; there would be lemonade and beer and rich layer cake. Then the men would begin to match poker hands, and the women to discuss babies in low tones.

Cherry never saw her husband so animated or so interested as when men he had known before chanced to drift into town, men from Nevada or from El Nido, or men he had known in college.

They would discuss personalities, would shout over recollected good times, would slap each other on the back and laugh tirelessly.

She thought him an extremely difficult man to live with, and was angered when her hints to this effect led him to remark that she was the "limit." They had a serious quarrel one day, when he told her that she was the most selfish and spoiled woman he had ever known. He called her attention to the other women of the town, busy, contented women, sending children off to school, settling babies down for naps in sunny dooryards, cooking and laughing and hurrying to and fro.

"Yes, and look at them!" Cherry said with ready tears. "Shabby, thin, tired all the time!"

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THE GUMPS—Look Who's Here — By Sidney Smith

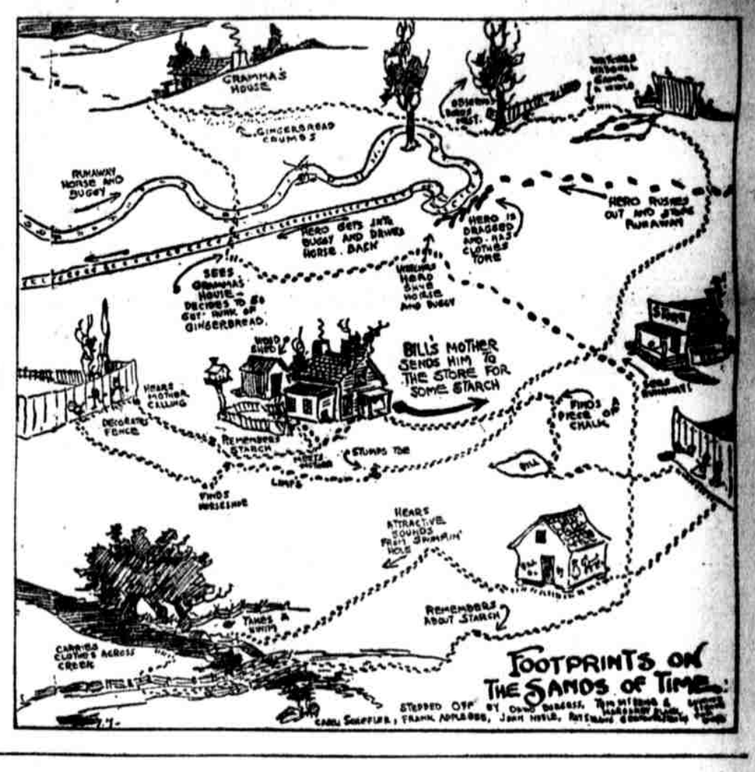
PETEY—Boy, a Couple Hundred Years Old — By C. A. Voight

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says what she hopes is that it will be a clean, dignified campaign with no resort to personalities and no exchange of amenities between the candidates.

PATHETIC FIGURES — By Fontaine Fox

SCHOOL DAYS — By DWIG



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Mrs. Brown Told the Truth

Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co. — By Hayward

"CAP" STUBBS—He Heard Too Much — By Edwina