

Sisters

by KATHLEEN NORRIS



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They were all deep in the first united tug, each person placed carefully by the doctor, and guys for the rope driven at intervals decided by



Laughing and Smothered With Roses, She Crept into View.

Martin, when there was an interruption for Cherry's arrival on the scene. With characteristic coyness she did not approach, as the others had, by means of the front porch and the garden path, but crept from the study window into a veritable tunnel of green bloom, and came crawling down it, as sweet and fragrant, as lovely and as fresh, as the roses themselves. Her bright head was hidden by a blue sunbonnet, assumed, she explained later, because the thorns tangled her hair; but as, laughing and smothered with roses, she crept into view, the sunbonnet slipped back, and the lovely, flushed little face, with tendrils of gold straying across the white forehead, and mischief gleaming in the blue, blue eyes was framed only in loosened pale gold hair.

Years afterward Alix remembered her so, as Martin Lloyd helped her to spring free of the branches, and she stood laughing at their surprise and still clinging to his hand. "The day we raised the rose tree" had a place of its own in Alix's memory, as a time of carefree fun and content, a time of perfume and sunshine—perhaps the last time of its kind that any one of them was to know.

Cherry looked at Martin daringly as she joined the laborers; her whole being was thrilling to the excitement of his glance; she was hardly conscious of what she was doing or saying. Martin came close to her, in the general confusion.

"How's my little sweetheart this morning?"

Cherry looked up, her throat contracted, she looked down again, unable to speak. She had been waiting for his first word; now that it had come it seemed so far richer and sweeter than her wildest dream.

"How can I see you a minute?" Martin murmured, snapping his big knife shut.

"I have to walk down for the mail," stammered Cherry, conscious only of Martin and herself.

Both Peter and her father were watching her with an uneasiness and suspicion that had sprung into being full-blown. Both men were asking themselves what they knew of this strange young man who was suddenly a part of their intimate little world.

Peter, in his secret heart, had a vague, dissatisfied feeling that Lloyd was a man who held women, as a class, rather in disrespect, and had probably had his experiences with them, but there was no way of expressing, much less governing his conduct toward Martin by so purely speculative a prejudice. Somewhat appalled, in the sunny garden, struggling with the banksia, Peter decided that this was not much to know of a person who might have the audacity to fall in love with an exquisite and innocent Cherry. After all, she would not be a little girl forever; some man would want to take that little corn-colored head and that delicious little pink-clad person away with him some day, to be his wife—

And suddenly Peter was torn by a stab of pure pain, and he stood puzzled and sick, in the garden bed, wondering what was happening to him.

"Listen—want a drink?" Alix asked, coming out with a tin dipper that spilled a glittering sheet of water down the thirsty nasturtiums. "Rest a few minutes, Peter. Dad wanted a pole, and Mr. Lloyd has gone up into the woods to cut one."

"And where's Cherry?" Peter asked,

drinking deep.

"She went along—just up in the woods here!" Alix answered. "They'll be back before you could get there. They've been gone five minutes!"

Five minutes were enough to take Cherry and her lover out of sight of the house, enough to have him put his arm about her, and to have her raise her lips confidently, and yet shyly, again to his. They kissed each other deeply, again and again.

Their talk was incoherent. Cherry was still playing, coquetting and smiling, her words few, and Martin, having her so near, could only repeat the endearing phrases that attempted to express to her his love and fervor.

"You darling! Do you know how I love you? You darling—you little exquisite beauty! Do you love me—do you love me?" Martin murmured, and Cherry answered breathlessly:

"You know I do—but you know I do!"

Presently he selected the sapling redwood, and brought it down with two blows of his ax. The girl seated herself beside him, helped him strip the trunk, their hands constantly touching, the man once or twice delaying her for one more snatched and laughing kiss. And Martin said that he was going to make her the happiest wife a man ever had.

Dragging the stripped tree, they ran down the sharp hill to the house just as Anne came out to announce luncheon. Peter was wandering off in the woods nearby, but came at Alix's shrill yell of summons, and looked relieved when he saw Cherry and Martin not even talking to each other. They had been gone only ten minutes.

It was a happy meal for everyone, and after it they had attacked the rose bush again, with aching muscles now, and in the first real summer heat. It was three o'clock before, with a great crackling, and the scream of a twisted branch, and a general panting and heaving on the part of the workers at last the feathery mass had risen a foot—two feet—into the air, had stood tottering like a wall of bloom, and finally, with a downward rush, had settled to its old place on the roof. Hoop was pressed into service now, and with Martin, was on the roof, grappling with a rope, shouting directions.

There was a rending, slipping noise on the roof, a scream from Martin, and shouts from the doctor and Peter. With a great sliding and rushing of the refractory sprays, and with a horrifying stumbling and falling, down came Martin, caught in a great rope of the creeper, almost at Cherry's feet.

A time of great running and calling ensued. Cherry dropped on her knees beside him, and had his head on her arm for a moment; then her father took her place, and Alix, with an astonished look at the younger girl's wet eyes, drew her sister away. Immediately afterward Martin sat up, looked bewilderedly about from one face to another, looked at his scratched wrist and said "Gee!" in a thoughtful tone.

"You scared Cherry out of ten years' growth!" Alix reproached Martin.

"I—I thought he might have hurt himself!" Cherry said, in the softest of little-girl voices, and with her shy little head hanging. Anne decided that it was becoming her clear duty to talk to Cherry.

A few minutes later Alix, Peter and Martin left for the daily ceremony of walking into the village for the mail.

The house was very still, early summer sweetness was drifting through wide-opened windows and doors; the long day was slowly declining. Anne peeped into the deserted living room, softened through all its pleasant shabbiness into real beauty by the shafts of sunset red that came in through the casement windows; and was deliberating between various becoming occupations—for Martin might walk back with the girls—when her uncle called her.

"Anne—you weren't there when that young chap tumbled. But I've been worrying about it a little. There's no question—there's no question that she—that Cherry—called him by his name, 'Martin,' she called him."

Anne had crossed to the shadowy doorway; she stood still.

"You've not noticed anything between him and Cherry?" pursued the doctor. "A girl might call a man by his name, I suppose—"

"I don't think there has been anything to notice," Anne stated, in a level tone.

"Well, it must be stopped, if it has begun," decided her uncle. "I can't permit it—I'd forgotten how the little witch grows!"

Again Anne was silent. She was not in love with Martin Lloyd; she was not as susceptible as the much younger Cherry, and she had not had

his urging to help her to a quick surrender. But for the first time in her life she had seen an absolutely suitable man, a man whose work, position, looks, name and character fitted her rather exacting standard, and for the first time she had let herself think confidently of being wooed and won.

And, standing in the doorway, she tasted the last bitter drops of the dream. It was all over. Anne was at the age that sets twenty-five years as the definite boundary of spinsterhood. She would be twenty-five in August.

Alix came in from her walk glowing, and full of a great discovery.

"Dad," she said eagerly, taking her place at the supper table, "what do you think! I'll bet you a dollar that man is falling in love with our Cherry!"

Anne, at the head of the table, looked pained, but there was genuine apprehension in the doctor's face.

"Where is your sister?" he asked.

"Down there by the gate," Alix answered. "They're gazing soulfully into each other's eyes, and all that! Peter went home. But Cherry—with a bean! Isn't that the ultimate extension of the limit! I'm crazy about it—I think it's great. I love weddings! This'll be the third I've been to!"

"All this seems to have come up very suddenly," the doctor said, dazedly, ruffling his gray hair with a fine old hand. "I don't imagine your sister is taking it as seriously as you and Anne seem inclined to—"

"Oh, does Anne think so?" Alix exclaimed.

"I think Cherry is one of the fortunate girls destined to drift along the surface of life," Anne said, "and to accept wifehood quite simply. I only wish I were that type—"

She was interrupted by Cherry herself. The girl came to the porch door, and as she hesitated there a minute, with her smiling eyes seeking her father's



"Dad!" said Cherry, "I've Brought Martin to Supper."

her face, they saw that by one firm, small hand she drew her lover beside her. Martin Lloyd's smiling face showed above hers in the lamplight.

"Dad!" said Cherry, with a childish breath. "Dad! I've brought Martin to supper!"

CHAPTER III.

The three at the table did not move for perhaps twenty slow seconds. Dr. Strickland, who had pushed back his chair, and whose hands were resting on the table before him, stared at them steadily. Anne, with a quick little hiss of surprise, smiled faintly. Alix, the unstilled, widened her eyes, and opened her mouth in unadvised astonishment. For there was no mistaking Cherry's tone.

"Doctor," said Martin, coming in, "this little girl of yours and I have something to tell you."

The old man looked at him sharply, almost sternly, looked about at the girls' faces, and was silent.

"Are you surprised, Daddy?" Cherry laughed, with all a child's innocent exultation. The next instant Anne and Martin were shaking hands, and Alix had enveloped Cherry in an enthusiastic embrace.

"Surprised!" exclaimed Alix. "Why, aren't you surprised yourself?"

Her sister flushed exquisitely, and Martin laughed.

"We're just about knocked silly!" he confessed, and all the girls laughed joyously.

A place was made for Martin, and biscuits and omelet and honey and tea were put into brisk circulation. Cherry took her chair, all dimples, flushes, smiles, and shy confidence.

"And what are your plans?" Anne asked maternally.

Her uncle, who had been silent during the excitement, mildly interposed: "I think we needn't go too fast, young people! You've only known each other a few weeks, after all; you must be pretty sure of yourselves before taking anything like a decisive step. Plenty of time—plenty of time. Mr. Lloyd here and I must have some talks about his plans—"

"I know exactly how you feel, Doctor," Martin said, sensibly and sympathetically. "I realize that I should have come to you first, and asked to pay my respects to your daughter. Except that it all came over me with such a rush. A week ago Cherry was only a most attractive child, to me. I'd spoken to my aunt about her and had said that I envied the man that was some day to win her, and that

was all! Then the time came for me to get back to work—and I found I couldn't go! And then came last night, when I began to say good-byes, and—it happened! I know that you all hardly know me, and I know that Cherry is pretty young to settle down, but I think I can satisfy you, Doctor, that you give her into safe hands, and I believe she'll never regret trusting me!"

He had gotten to his feet as he spoke and was holding the back of his chair, looking anxiously and eagerly into the old man's eyes.

"Well—" said the doctor, touched, in his gentlest tone, "well! It had to come, perhaps. I can't promise her to you very soon, Mr. Lloyd. But if you both are willing to wait, and if time proves this to be the real feeling, I don't believe you'll find me hard on you!"

"That's all I ask, sir!" Martin said, resuming his seat and his dinner. And for the rest of the meal harmony and gaiety reigned.

After dinner Cherry and Martin, in all the ecstatic first delight of recognized love, went out to the wide front porch, where there were wicker chairs, under the rose vines. Alix alone laughed at them as they went. Anne, with a storm in her heart, played noisily on the piano, and the doctor, after giving the doorway where Cherry had disappeared a wistful look, restlessly took to his armchair and his book, in such desolation of spirit as he had not known since the dark day of her mother's death.

The next day Alix and the engaged pair walked up to invite Peter to a tennis foursome on the old Blithedale court. It was a Saturday, and as he usually dined with them, or asked them to dine with him on Saturday, they were not surprised to find him busy with a charcoal burner, under the trees, compounding a marvelous dish of chicken, tomatoes, cream and mushrooms.

"Stop your messing one second!" Alix said, catching him by the arm. "Congratulate these creatures—they're they're going to be married! Why don't you congratulate them?"

Peter gave one long look at Martin and Cherry, who stood laughing, but a little confused and self-conscious, too, in the grassy path. With a shock like death in his heart, he realized that it was all over. Their protection of her, their suspicions, had come too late. Blith child that she was, she was committed to this fascinating and mysterious adventure.

His face grew dark with a sudden rush of blood. But he went to them quickly and shook hands with Martin, and was presently reproaching Cherry for her secretiveness in his old, or almost his old, way.

He arranged that they were to play the tennis here on his own courts, and later dine with him, but under his hospitality and under the golden beauty of the day it was all pain—pain—pain. It was agony to see her with him, beginning to taste the rapture of love given and returned; it was agony to have the conversation return always to Martin and Cherry, to the first love affair. Peter felt that he could have killed this newcomer, this thief, this usurper of the place that he himself might have filled.

"Dad's always said he disapproved of long engagements," Alix commented, amusedly, "but you ought to hear him now! This thing—he won't even call it an engagement—it's an understanding, or a preference—is to be a profound secret, and Cherry's to be twenty-one before any one else but ourselves knows—"

Peter did not hear her. There was beginning a little hope in his heart. Girls did not usually fulfill their first engagements; did not often do so, in fact. The thing was a secret; it might well come to nothing, after all.

That was the beginning, and after it, although it was arranged between them all that nothing should be changed, and that nobody but themselves should share the secret, somehow life seemed different. Two or three days after the momentous day of the raising of the rose tree, Martin Lloyd went to his mine at El Nido, and the interrupted current of life in the brown bungalow supposedly found its old groove.

But nothing was the same. The doctor, in the first place, was more silent and thoughtful than the girls had ever seen him before. Anne and Alix knew that he was not happy about Cherry's plans, if the younger girl did not. With Alix only he talked of the engagement, and she knew from his comments, his doubtful manner, that he felt it to be a mistake. The ten years' difference between Cherry and Martin distressed him; he spoke of it again and again.

Cherry was changed, too, and not only in the expected and natural ways, Alix thought. Her daily letter from Martin, her new prospects, not only increased her importance in the other girls' eyes, but innocently inflated her own self-confidence. She had promised to keep the engagement "or understanding, or preference," a profound secret, but this was impossible. First one intimate friend and then another was allowed to gasp and exclaim over the news. The time came when Anne decided that it was not "decent" not to let Martin's aunt know of it, when all these other people knew. Finally came a dinner to the Norths', when Cherry's health was drunk, and then the engagement presents began to come in.

Her father only looked tenderly into the blue eyes and tightened his big arm protectingly about the slender young shoulders. But he was deeply depressed. There was nothing to be said against young Lloyd. It was only—

—mused the doctor, aghast—only

what was being done in the world every day. But he was staggered by the bright readiness with which all of them—Cherry, Martin, the other girls—accepted the stupendous fact that Cherry was to be married.

She was quite frankly and delightedly discussing trousseau now, too entirely absorbed in her own happiness



She Was Delightedly Discussing Trousseau Now.

to see that the other girls had lives to live as well as she.

"I got my cards yesterday," she said one day. "I was passing the shop and I thought I might as well! The woman looked at me so queerly; she said: 'Mrs. John Martin Lloyd. Are these for your mother?' 'No,' I said. 'They're for me!' I wish you could have seen her look. Martin says in today's letter that he thinks people will say I'm his daughter, and Alix—he says that you are to come up to visit us, and we're going to find you a fine husband! Won't it be funny to think of your visiting me! Oh, and Anne—did you see what Mrs. Fairfax sent me? A great big glorious fur coat! She said I would need it up there, and I guess I will! It's not new, you know; she says it isn't the real present, but it can be cut down and it will look like new."

And so on and on. The other girls listened, sympathized and rejoiced, but it was not always easy.

August brought Martin. He was delighted with his work in the El Nido mine, the "Emmy Younger," and everything he had to say about it was amusing and interesting. It was still in a rather chaotic condition, he reported, but the "stuff" was there, and he anticipated a busy winter. He was to have a cottage, a pretty crude affair, in a few weeks, right at the mine.

"How does that listen to you?" he asked Cherry. She gave her father a demure and interrogative glance. Martin, following it, immediately sobered.

"Just what is your position there?" the doctor asked, pleasantly.

"A little bit of everything, now," Martin answered, readily and respectfully. "Later, of course, I shall have my own special work. At present I'm doing some of the assaying and have charge of the sluice-gang. They want me to make myself generally useful, make suggestions, take hold in every way!"

"That's the way to get on," the older man said, approvingly. Cherry looked admiringly, with all her heart in her eyes, at her husband-to-be; the other girls were impressed, too. Martin had not been with them more than a few hours before the engagement was openly discussed, and there were constant references to Cherry's marriage.

Somewhat, a few days later, wedding plans were in the air, and they were all taking it for granted that Cherry and Martin were to be married almost immediately; in October, in fact. The doctor at first persisted that the event must wait until April, but Martin's reasonable impatience and Cherry's plaintive "But why, Daddy?" were too much for him. Why, indeed? Cherry's mother had been married at eighteen, when that mother's husband was more than ten years older than Martin Lloyd was now.

"Would ye let it go on, eh?" the doctor asked, somewhat embarrassed, one evening when he and Peter were walking from the train in the late September twilight.

"Lord, don't ask me!" Peter said, gruffly. "I think she's too young to marry anyone—but the mischief's done now!"

"I think I'll talk to her," her father decided. "Anything is better than having her make a mistake. I think she'll listen to me!" And a day or two later he called her into the study. It was a quiet autumn morning, foggy yet warm, with a dewy, woody sweetness in the air.

"Before we decide this thing finally," the doctor said, smiling into her bright face, "before Martin writes his people that it's settled, I want to ask you to do something. It's something you won't like to do, my little girl. I want ye to wait a while—wait a year!"

It was said. He watched the brightness fade from her glowing face. She lowered her eyes. The line of her mouth grew firm.

stung them.

"Can't take your old father's word for it?" Dr. Strickland asked.

"It isn't that, Dad!" she protested eagerly and affectionately. "I'll wait—"

"I have waited! I'll wait until Christmas, or April, if you say so! But it won't make any difference; nothing will. I love him and he loves me, and we always will."

"You don't know," Cherry went on, with suddenly watering eyes, "you don't know what this summer of separation has meant to us both! If we must wait longer, why, we will, of course, but it will mean that I am just living along somehow—oh, I won't cry!" she interrupted, smiling with wet lashes. "I'll try to bear it decently! But sometimes I feel as if I couldn't bear it—"

A rush of tears choked her. She groped for a handkerchief and felt, as she had felt so many times, her father's handkerchief pressed into her hand. The doctor sighed. There was nothing more to be said.

So he gave Cherry a wedding check that made her dance with joy, and there was no more seriousness. There were gowns, dinners, theater parties and presents; every day brought its new surprise and new delight to Cherry. She had her cream-colored rajah silk, but her sister and cousin persuaded her to be married in white, and it was their hands that dressed the first bride when the great day came, and fastened over her corn-colored hair her mother's lace veil.

It was a day of soft sweetness, not too brightly summery, but warm and still under the trees. Until ten o'clock



They Fastened Over Her Corn-Colored Hair Her Mother's Lace Veil.

the mountain and the tops of the redwoods were tangled in scarfs of white fog, then the mellow sunlight pierced it with sudden spectacular brightening and lifting.

At twelve o'clock Charity Strickland became Charity Lloyd and was kissed and toasted and congratulated until her lovely little face was burning with color and her blue eyes were bewildered with fatigue. At two o'clock there were good-bys. Cherry had changed the wedding satin for the cream-colored rajah silk then and wore the extravagant hat. It would be many years before she would spend twenty-five dollars for a hat again, and never again would she see bronzed cocks' feathers against bronzed straw without remembering the clean little wood-smelling bedroom and the hour in which she had pinned her wedding hat over her fair hair, and had gone, demure and radiant and confident, to meet her husband in the old hallway.

She was confusedly kissed, passed from hand to hand, was conscious with a sort of strange aching at her heart that she was not only far from saying the usual heart-broken things in farewell, but was actually far from feeling them. She laughed at Alix's last nonsense, promised to write—wouldn't say good-by—would see them all soon—was coming, Martin—and so a last kiss for darling Dad and good-by and so many thanks and thanks to them all!

She was gone. With her the uncertain autumn sunshine vanished and a shadow fell on the forest. The mountain above the valley was blotted out with fog. The brown house seemed dark and empty when the last guests had loitered away and the last caterer had gathered up his possessions and had gone.

The doctor had changed his unwonted wedding finery for his shabby old smoking jacket, but Peter still looked unnaturally well dressed. Alix stepped down to sit between them and her father's arm went about her. She snuggled against him in an unusual mood of tenderness and quiet.

"Be nice to me!" she said, whimsically. "I'm lonely!"

"H'm!" her father said, significantly, tightening his arm. Peter moved up on the other side and locked his own arm in her free one. And so they sat, silent, depressed, their shoulders touching, their somber eyes fixed upon the shadowy depths of the forest into which an October fog was softly and noiselessly creeping.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Cuba's Varieties of Hardwoods. Cuba has about 367 varieties of excellent hardwoods. Besides mahogany and cedar, there are about thirty species of palm. The royal palm is probably the most useful tree on the island, every part from leaves to roots being utilized by natives.